



CASUAL GAMES
ASSOCIATION

Fall 2007

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About the cover: Walter Wilson is an artist at Popcap whose portfolio includes Zuma.

Walter 07

EXCITING GAMES CREATION IS OUR MAIN PASSION



DRAGON ALTAR GAMES is a game development studio with the technical, creative and production capabilities to create a new generation of casual games.

Our team consists of the most experienced specialists. In addition to our own titles we develop custom outsourcing games using C++, Flash, Java and other technologies.

www.dragonaltar.com



Letter from the Director



Wow. If you missed Casual Connect Seattle in July you really blew it. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but the sessions there were really inspiring, both because of what they told us about our industry and because of what they signaled about our organization. Let me just put it this way: This is a great association to be a part of.

One of my favorite sessions at the conference was Jamie Monberg's "Bringing Brand to Interactive". It really made me think—and subsequently realize that as an industry we really need to focus more on innovation—on bringing new ideas and professional execution to our products.

To be clear, I believe that the standard genres of casual games are healthy and likely to continue for some time to come, providing our customers a foundational level of comfort and familiarity—orientation on which they depend. Even so, if we look back in time (as Juan Gril will help you do in this edition of *Casual Connect*) we can see that many new kinds of games have appeared over the years, gently reshaping the casual games landscape while growing rather than alienating our base of enthusiasts.

With all of that in mind, we are devoting this entire issue to innovation. You'll find brainstorming help, tips on fostering organizational creativity, and other sources of inspiration. Our goal here isn't merely to get you to read—we're also hoping to get you to think about familiar things in new and interesting ways.

While we are not here to tell you what the next cool thing is going to be (that would ruin the surprise), we're sort of thinking that maybe you will be the one to come up with it. And if we can help you do that, all the better.

Sincerely,

Jessica

Jessica Tams

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Dear ed.

Letters to the Editor

We get something like a gazillion letters (give or take) from people saying how much they love the Casual Connect conferences. But because we're petty and jealous, we're only printing the letters we really like (the ones about the magazine). Like these:

Dear ed.:

I have had a passion for developing games since high school. Two years ago I started to develop intensively in my spare time, which is basically late at night when my wife and kids are asleep. So far I have five free-to-try downloadable titles for Win and Mac and a great amount of experience acquired by interacting and receiving feedback from my customers. Today I am starting my first day as an indie casual game developer . . . yes, I left my 10-year, well-paid job to follow this dream.

I told you all this story because I want to thank your organization (Casual Games Association and the Casual Connect magazine) for the valuable, quality information you provide about this nascent industry. Every single article in the magazine and each of the 39 podcasts from the Seattle event are full of interesting stories, experiences from key people, leading business models, game design concepts, industry trend analysis, etc. All this information helps me make better decisions for my games and customers. THANK YOU!!!

Andres M.
Key Biscayne, Florida, USA

Andres:

We always feel we have fulfilled our purpose when we can get somebody to quit a good job to go make games instead.

- ed.

Dear ed.:

I finally got around to opening up the nice big envelope from CGA that arrived weeks (months?) ago. Inside was a very thick, very polished looking *Casual Connect* magazine. I've already started reading through it, and I just wanted to say that it looks incredibly informative and I tip my virtual hat to you. I tossed my copy of *Game Developer Magazine* (from the same pile of mail) into the trash can, unopened.

Peter F.
Issaquah, Washington, USA

Peter:

You have excellent taste.

- ed.

Dear ed.:

The latest Casual Connect Magazine looks great! Looking forward to reading through it as usual.

Cooper M.
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Coop:

Hope you like it. We can also tell you where get a free copy of Game Developer Magazine if you're interested. Any chance you're going to be in Issaquah any time soon?

- ed.

Dear ed.:

The mag gets better and better. Please tell your crew they did a great job. Very very pro.

Can you tell me what thickness/stock is used for the cover and also the inside content? Is the cover 50# glossy laminate and what is the inside?

Michael M.
Lake Forest, California, USA

Dear Michael:

The crew tells me it's 80 lb. gloss cover stock on the outside and 80 lb. gloss on the inside. I'm not sure what all that means except that maybe I've blown my postage budget again.

- ed.

Suck up to ed. and maybe you'll get your name in the magazine...

He can be reached at editor@casualconnect.org

There's Always a Bigger Fish...

...Until Now

Over the last 5 years, Big Fish Games has grown to become the largest casual games distribution portal in the world. We're downloading more games on a daily basis than any other one single site on the market. And with our new PNP affiliate program, we're more committed than ever to growing the casual games industry with our developer and affiliate partners. Come swim with us - we're building a new world of casual games, one gamer at a time.



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The Brainstorming Brainstorm

Notes from a Flipchart

Perhaps you were there. (A lot of you were.) It was one of the most popular (and loudest) sessions at Casual Connect Seattle in July. Well, in case you missed it, we thought we would share some notes from that session—both to enlighten you and to let you know about the kind of fun and learning you miss out on when you blow off a Casual Connect conference. We won't, however, attempt to explain that shirt David was wearing. For that you had to be there.

Topic #1—Brainstorm Prep

Purposes of the Session

1. To come up with LOTS of great ideas and feedback about how to effectively inspire group creative thinking.
2. To generate new ideas through collaboration.

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #1—Set your goals and rules clearly at the start, and re-enforce them throughout the discussion to make sure you get what you want out of the session.

Topic #2—Breaking the Ice

For this session, I wore a remarkable shirt—a baggy black affair, with gold brocade and tassels, handmade by a wonderful woman in Rivne in the Ukraine. We discussed it briefly. I invited the group to tell me what they liked about it. I invited them to tell me what they didn't like about it. (As you might have guessed, they became more animated during the second part of the discussion.) The details of what they said are entirely beside the point:

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #2—For best results, always warm up your group before attempting an intense brainstorm to get people in the mood. Pick something easy, subjective, with good possibility for non-threatening difference of opinion. Kind of like stretching before you work out, this will help your more serious or difficult topics go more smoothly.

Topic #3—Creating Consistent Creativity

Within the Office

- Allow expression through personalization/decoration of the office space. (Nerf rocket launchers, especially those of the USB variety, are particularly useful.)
- Have a space customized for brainstorming.
- Provide lots of colored markers and white boards—and use them.
- Sponsor an Employee Show & Tell to encourage people to share and become comfortable with each other.
- Play games to develop deep knowledge of your topic and to stimulate broad-range creativity.
- Play games as icebreakers and as creative thinking exercises. For example, you can use regular board-gaming sessions as opportunities for creative conversation.

Within a Brainstorming Session

- Leave the office. Go somewhere else (outdoors maybe?).
- Encourage a supportive, positive tone in people's interactions.
- Let people be goofy/random.
- Sit at a round table—both as a symbol of equality and to ensure there are no power seats.
- Alcohol always helps.
- Trust comes before creativity. Your people must trust each other or be severely punished (kidding about that last part).
- Use a mind-mapping board or software—with lots of sticky notes—to encourage non-linear thinking.
- Fill the place with props, toys, music, books—a variety of fun and interesting stuff to encourage creativity all the time.
- Involve the whole company. That may be kind of hard at Microsoft, but the point is that people from different walks of life bring diverse perspectives to a problem.

David Nixon



“People rarely look down on you for coming up with ideas that don't suck enough. What's more, it seems that most of the good ideas are inspired by bad ones.”

- Invite random participants. Mixing up the pool creates dramatically different results.
- Encourage physical movement (to shake up thinking and look at the problem from different perspectives).

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #3—Start with easier topics and move to harder ones. It's natural to be sort of sluggish and self-conscious at the start of these sessions. Non-personal, more general topics are easier to start with than more personal, contentious, or specific problems.

The Brainstorming Brainstorm

Notes from a Flipchart

Topic #4—Mistakes and Horrors—Things That Suck

- Individuals who dominate the conversation
- Shooting down ideas mid-brainstorming
- Rooms that are too hot or too cold
- Sidetracking, going off on a tangent, or rat-holing
- Taking things too personally
- Not involving key decision-makers
- Not taking notes
- The phrase “Yeah, but”
- Over-refining during idea generation
- Trying to brainstorm a topic that is too narrow (“the color of this button”) or overly broad (“new game ideas”)
- Ignoring the quiet people
- High-level intimidation
- Low blood sugar
- Sessions that are too long
- Too many yes-men
- Early morning and late-day meetings
- Being afraid of your boss
- Deadline distractions

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #4—Most people are more comfortable saying what something is not than what something is. Sometimes it is useful to brainstorm a “negative” topic, talking about the opposite of what you’re actually trying to achieve in order to put your audience more at ease. (Think about it this way: There is little personal risk involved when the assignment is to contribute ideas that suck. What’s the worst that can happen? you come up with an idea along the way that everybody loves?) People rarely look down on you for coming up with ideas that don’t suck enough. What’s more, it seems that most of the good ideas are inspired by bad ones.

Topic #5—Brainstorming Formats, Platforms, and Structures

Guidelines for maximizing session effectiveness:

- Have a moderator.
- Have a dedicated note-taker.
- Prepare ahead of time (moderator and participants).
- Impose the “No Shouting” rule.
- Enforce the idea of “equality” among participants.
- Keep groups small—maybe 10 people or fewer?
- Brainstorm often to keep people “in the mode.”
- Go “shields down”—no laptops, no cell phones, no Gameboys, etc.

Techniques and Tools to improve and capture output:

- Provide plenty of materials for prolific note-taking (whiteboard, paper, flipcharts, digital camera, etc.).
- Use mind-mapping software. (BrainMine, FreeMind, and HeadCase all have received high marks on Download.com.)
- Divide into smaller “micro groups” for certain topics.
- Have several different locations to mix up the “feel.”
- Play games to help broaden thinking and encourage participation (“Word Association,” “Spitballing,” “Ideaball,” “Pass the Mic,” etc.)
- Fill the room with props!

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #5—Since this is a creative process, it thrives on new perspectives. Think as much about how, when, and where you do your brainstorming as you do about what you brainstorm about. Habitual behavior is an enemy of creativity.

Topic #6—Preparing Participants

- Hire good creative people to begin with.
- Provide initial ideas, goals, and rules ahead of time.
- Assign preparatory homework.
- Send reminders.
- Pre-populate the white board (with agenda, rules, topics) to make the session more efficient.
- Take time to clear your mind before starting. Step away from your desk, leave your cell phone behind, take 15 minutes before the meeting to relax, write some notes, and get ready to address the topics.
- Always summarize and follow up with results and action items.

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #6—It is the moderator’s responsibility to prepare for brainstorming—including preparing the participants—but it takes time and effort to do so! At the same time, managers should make sure support the moderator’s efforts by giving involved staff the time and mandate to prepare and participate. Unless managers consistently signal that brainstorming is a priority, the quality of your sessions will suffer.



Topic #7—Effective, Inspiring Moderation

- Wear a controversial shirt (it always works for me!).
- Be high-energy and enthusiastic.
- Be positive.
- Stay neutral (meaning focus on encouraging participation, not participating).
- Keep the discussion on topic.
- Enforce the rules.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Quell personal attacks quickly.
- Make sure everyone is heard.
- Improvise questions to answer.
- Stay aware of group dynamics.
- Keep the discussion moving.
- Give credit.
- Be respectful.
- Be adept at subtly manipulating the participants (as a guide, rather than a policeman).
- Help make the abstract more concrete, providing inspiring, specific examples of an abstract concept when necessary.
- Break up fights.
- Be knowledgeable about the topic and goals.
- Translate and paraphrase to keep participants in sync.
- Know when to stop.

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #7—A really good moderator dramatically improves the effectiveness of these kinds of conversations. Having an expert in your organization who cares about the process of creativity can work wonders, even if that person has a different “day job.” That person should be a naturally good moderator who can train and be an example to others of how to fill this important role.

Since this is a creative process, it thrives on new perspectives. Habitual behavior is an enemy of creativity.



Topic #8—Keeping It Interesting

- Warm up.
- Make a game of it.
- Keep it moving by using time limits throughout.
- Randomize topics.
- Change physical dynamics.
- Take breaks if the meeting is long.
- Don’t sit.
- Vary participants.
- Employ a good moderator.
- Build on ideas.
- Ask for bad ideas.
- Keep answers brief.
- Alcohol helps (did I mention that already?).

Cleverly Hidden Brainstorming Lesson #8—Brainstorming can be effective and fun. It works best when you do it a lot, but even a too-large, unprepped group of relative strangers can have a great time being creative together!

Since 1999 David Nixon (nixoft@hotmail.com) has dedicated himself to pioneering new ways for our “casual” games to reach new audiences. In 1999, with RealArcade, he was one of the first to see the potential of the “try before you buy” model. In 2000 he was one of the first to attempt “2nd Party” publishing. In 2001 he was looking to Eastern Europe as a source of commercially viable PC games, while inspiring game developers around the world to participate in the amazing opportunities this category offered. In 2004 he helped catapult Oberon Media onto the casual games world stage. Then 2005 found David evangelizing “console casual” games with his central role in the launch of Xbox Live Arcade. He currently works as Executive Producer at Oberon Media.

Ideaball

When the Traditional Brainstorm Strikes Out

So, you're sitting in a meeting. Maybe it's a brainstorming session. Maybe you're trying to resolve a screen layout fix, or adding a mechanical axis or two in order to spice up game-play. Or maybe you're trying to come up with a new character type, or a funny upgrade, or a better power-up. Do you need a better feedback loop? Or a game title?

That's it! A game title! Your publisher's marketing team needs a new name for this game because Legal says the name you've been using for the last three months is already taken by a breakfast cereal!

You've been there, right?

Maybe it's Friday and everyone's tired. Folks have been pulling all-nighters to cram and crunch for alpha and now you've got a new creative mountain to climb.

But every idea you hear from your weekend-bound team is hackneyed, clichéd, or just plain worn-out. Every artless idea you find yourself scribbling up on the white board leaves you longing for a hammer.

That's when it's time for Ideaball.

Ideaball breathes new life into the traditional brainstorm. It gets everyone up from the conference table, brings the group together, and produces fresh ideas. The purpose of Ideaball is to get people to loosen up and say the first things that come to their minds—and then, fast as lightning, toss the ball to someone else. The pace feels like: Hurry up! Go! Throw!

How to Play Ideaball

STEP ONE: Have everyone in the room write one idea or just one word (related to the question at hand) on a piece of paper and hand their papers to you.

STEP TWO: Have everyone stand up and get in a circle.

STEP THREE: Read one page aloud and crinkle it up into a nice, tossable ball. You now hold in your hand the Ideaball.

STEP FOUR: Toss the Ideaball across the room to someone randomly in the group.

STEP FIVE: Here's the fun part: no one can hold the Ideaball more than three seconds.

It's sort of like playing Hot Potato: You've got to get rid of that ball right away and throw it to someone else in the group. But the only way you can release the ball is to shout out the first word that comes to your mind.

STEP SIX: If you run out of steam, or the Ideaball becomes too threadbare to sustain another toss, just pick up the next piece of paper, read aloud, crumple, and toss. . . .

If done right, Ideaball gets the blood flowing back into a tired team, gets people thinking out-of-the-box quickly and gets new ideas out on the table fast—it even lets people blow off a little steam when they're stuck.

At PlayFirst, we pull out the Ideaball on a regular basis. In fact, it was the method we used to come up with the name of one of our biggest hit titles this year. Here's a snippet of what our Ideaball naming session was like:

- Toss: Dreamster
- Toss: Dreamiac
- Toss: Dream Machine
- Toss: Dream library
- Toss: Writing
- Toss: Squirrels
- All: Squirrels?
- Toss: Books
- Toss: Bible
- Toss: Lore
- Toss: Chronicles

Hey! Chronicles! Dream Chronicles? Not bad. . . .

So there you have it: A little toss from PlayFirst. I suppose it may not fly around the tables of investment banking, or within the hallowed halls of Academia, but it works for us. And no, it has not eluded me that a game company has offered a game as a strategy for brainstorming, but hey, what did you expect? A spreadsheet?

As Vice President and Creative Director, Kenny Dinkin oversees game design, character, and story development for the PlayFirst games portfolio, which includes inventive, top-selling first and third-party brands such as *Diner Dash*, *Chocolatier*, *Wedding Dash* and *Dream Chronicles*. Kenny brings over a decade of success in designing, directing, and producing a wide

Kenny Shea Dinkin



“If done right, Ideaball gets the blood flowing back into a tired team, gets people thinking out of the box quickly and gets new ideas out on the table fast.”

array of award-winning consumer products and interactive platforms.

Prior to joining PlayFirst, Kenny was the world-wide head of product design for The Learning Company/Broderbund, where he was creative lead for a portfolio of premiere children's software brands, including *Reader Rabbit*, *Carmen Sandiego*, and *KidPix* as well as licensed properties such as *Scooby-Doo*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, *Batman*, *Powerpuff Girls*, and *Arthur*. A visual artist, writer, musician, game designer, and avid comic book reader, Kenny was also the co-creator of the critically acclaimed, top-selling brand *The ClueFinders*.

Kenny earned a Bachelor's degree in History from Brown University and an M.F.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Design.

Playing at Work

The Intangibles of Running a Game Company

Much has been said about the tangible, concrete problems of starting and running a game development studio. In addition to the thorny questions of legal company structures and managing finances, there are equally important but less tangible issues that game development entrepreneurs must face. How do you keep your employees creatively engaged with their work? What kind of company culture results in successful games? These hard-to-define but essential-for-success intangibles often make the difference between a company that merely limps along and one that thrives and shines, both inside and out.

In this article, we will try to make these intangible issues as tangible as possible by referencing our own experience with Gamelab, a successful 7-year-old independent game development company. Two important but intangible principles that exemplify our approach to engaging our staff and fostering creativity are:

- Make Everyone an Author
- Design a Company Culture of Research and Play

These two key issues are intangible because each one involves all of a company's departments and functions, and also because each one touches the daily experience of everyone on staff. They are part of the internal processes which keep the company running on a daily basis. In our experience, the truly successful companies, the ones at which we all wish we were working, are the companies that get these intangibles right.

Before we dive in, one caveat: Do not be fooled by the simplicity of the advice we offer. As with many aspects of starting and running a business, these complex questions have many correct answers and our solutions may not be right for you. We are not advocating that every company should be managed the way we run Gamelab. But we hope there is something you can glean from our approach that can be useful for your own endeavors.

Make Everyone an Author

If there is one overriding directive that infuses everything we do at Gamelab, it is the idea that everyone who works at the company is an author—that our staff should feel as if they are the ones contributing ideas, working through problems, and creating great games. It is crucial that all of your employees feel a sense of responsibility and authorship over what they do. If you can instill this key sensibility into your team, many of your other problems will begin to be solved as you find that your staff will solve them for you.

What exactly do we mean by a sense of authorship? Consider its opposite. If people do not have this feeling about their work, they will feel like a wage slave (even if they are well paid), clocking in at the start of each workday to tick off to-do boxes and complete tasks for someone else. It seems that most negative work situations stem from the fact that people feel like they are doing someone else's work. In such environments, it does not matter to employees how polished a game is or even whether it gets finished. Projects will tend to go over schedule and end up with lackluster results—or (worse yet) crash and burn.

On the other hand, when staff have a genuine feeling of authorship over what they do, then they are not merely workers anymore: They become collaborators. They take the extra time to diagnose obstacles within the overall development process. They will listen to critical feedback on their own work and offer thoughtful comments to others. They will care very much about the quality of the final product and about the company as a whole.

Productivity will increase if employees are creatively engaged—which requires more than mere financial incentives. Some companies use reward systems like bonuses or stock options in order to create a sense of ownership (or even genuine legal ownership) among its employees.

Peter Lee & Eric Zimmerman



“How do you keep your employees creatively engaged with their work? What kind of company culture results in successful games?”

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These approaches can work to a certain extent, but purely financial incentives can only go so far. Money without any genuine authorship becomes an empty gesture, a lure to keep talent from running off to another company. Make no mistake: Financial incentives are important, but they are not enough. From our experience, the intangible benefits of an authorship-focused company generally outweigh any possible tangible financial gains. This may not be true in every industry, but it certainly is true of a creative field like game development.

So how do you impart authorship to your staff? The secret is that authority and responsibility cannot be faked. You cannot pretend to offer authorship, while still actually structuring your company as if most of the staff are minions that can't be trusted without extensive oversight and approvals. In order for them to feel authority and responsibility, they actually have to be given real authority and responsibility over what they do.

What does this mean in practice? At Gamelab, we do not have a single individual that plays the role of “creative director” or “vision leader” on any given project. If you are assigned to do character design on a game, then you are the one doing the character design. General decisions are made through team consensus, but there is no manager reviewing each of your designs, telling you that they do or do not measure up. You are given ultimate authority on the tasks assigned to you to solve.

In the real world, it may be tricky to pull this off. In an environment without trust and communication among project team members, the danger is that staff become territorial and hoard their own authority while scoffing at others’ attempts to tell them what to do. On the other hand, if you can keep trust and communication healthy, then the opposite happens: Team members become desperate for feedback from everyone else, and there is idea exchange and feedback across all members and disciplines.

Giving authority to your staff does not mean that you cannot have internal hierarchies and structures. At Gamelab, the art director still supervises and directs the visual designers on a project, conceptually directing each individual designer through research and initial design explorations. But every visual designer is ultimately given the autonomy to solve the problems that he or she is assigned. And they are in large part responsible for making sure that their individual work is fitting into the team’s larger evolving vision for the game as a whole.

One result of this approach is that staff are always challenged to solve tasks in new ways. The experience of constant challenge is a key part of feeling like an author. If your team starts solving design and development problems in the same ways over and over, the spark will go out of their work. They will feel like zombies on an assembly line showing up each day to do someone else’s drudgery. People feel like authors when they are given the creative freedom to solve problems in new ways—whether they are full-time employees or project-based freelancers. And a company full of motivated innovators will produce much better work than a company full of zombified assistants.

Creating challenges for your staff takes some strategizing—and a willingness to explore new creative territory. For example, at Gamelab our goal is to always try and come up with new kinds of audio and visual aesthetics, new sorts of game-play, and new directions for content on every project. For example, every downloadable game has certain interface elements in common (like an options screen, a main menu, etc.). On any given title, we try and express the game’s narrative on these screens, finding different approaches each time. While at many game companies these common parts of games are all implemented in the same cookie-cutter style, our visual staff likes the challenge of having to actually design the interface themselves. That is why we hired them, right? It can be quite challenging to

do this on every project, but it definitely motivates our talent. And it gives our games variety as well.

Relative to a more traditional, authoritarian approach, giving your staff a genuine sense of authorship by giving them real responsibility can feel scary. You and your senior staff probably know better how to solve many of the problems that come up and, in the short term, it is easier simply to tell people what to do. But if you treat the rank-and-file as mere order-takers, everyone will end up unhappy. Your supervisors will be overworked as they micromanage everything that happens under them, without the time to address their own tasks. The rest of your company will lose interest in the big picture as employees simply do what they think their manager wishes without considering the game or the company as a whole.

Democratizing authorship has to come from the top down. Are you setting a good example for your staff? Do your processes instill the trust and communication that team authorship requires? Are the people at your company given the freedom to solve tasks in the ways they see fit? To make everyone an author requires constant vigilance against the natural tendency to control everything that happens at your company. But making sure it happens is absolutely essential to success.

Design a Company Culture of Research and Play

For us, company culture very simply means the daily experience of the staff, both individually and collectively. The lived culture of a company should embody the values and philosophy of the company as a whole. Company culture is a prime example of a business intangible: it is difficult to perceive and to define, but it permeates everything at a game company and is essential to the success of the organization.

The culture of a company is both a cause and effect of everything the company does. If your group’s culture is on the right track,

Defining and designing how your company operates is a lot like creating a game. The policies you define, the tools you purchase, the way you lay out the workspace—these are the rules.



then good work and healthy processes will thrive at your business and the culture will both reflect and positively impact the continued success of what you do. If there are problems with your company culture, these troubles are very likely symptoms of deeper problems, and the unhealthy culture can easily compound into yet more problems.

Our main point about company culture is that you must be conscious and intentional about it: You need to actively design the culture of your organization. Too often, the culture of a game company simply arises by default, as the business founders are too busy keeping things rolling financially to worry about the daily experiences of everyone on staff. But apathy or inattention will likely result in a lackluster organization. It takes experimentation and collaboration with your staff to figure out the kind of company culture that is appropriate for you and how to best achieve it.

One rule is to create the company you would want to work for. Small efforts go a long way. At Gamelab, we have the best

benefits packages for our staff that we can afford. We emphasize flexible hours to accommodate people’s differing work patterns and needs. We consult with our staff on the computers, furniture, software, and supplies they need. And you always get a cupcake with a candle on your birthday. These simple gestures can make the difference between a company that feels like a place where you would love to work and one that is just another paycheck generator.

Beyond these straightforward policies, we have a more particular focus for Gamelab’s company culture: research. Our goal is to have a company experience in which research is integrated into the daily activities of the people at our company. We take “research”—in the broadest sense of the word—to mean finding connections between the company and the world outside. Research can be project-specific or quite general. It can include teaching, reading, playing, discussing, or traveling. And it should be fun.



Our main point about company culture is that you must be conscious and intentional about it: You need to actively design the culture of your organization.

Photographs by Dauna Jeong

Playing at Work

The Intangibles of Running a Game Company

Why is research important for a game company? Because game companies create culture—pop culture. Too often, game developers come from the insular and somewhat geeky world of hardcore gaming. But to create innovative games, the people making your games need to be inspired by art, entertainment, design, and other forms of ideas and culture outside of the narrow confines of the gamer lifestyle. By encouraging research, you increase the solution space from which your staff can draw as they tackle problems in their everyday work.

The culture of research we try to inculcate at Gamelab stems from very specific company activities and policies. A few are highlighted below:

Research Library

Every month, each Gamelab staff member can spend \$50 on purchasing something for the Gamelab library. Purchases include books, videos, music, board games, magazine subscriptions, posters, toys, and, of course, videogames. As the library grows, it comes to reflect the interests of the staff, even as it becomes a richer and richer resource for people to browse as they take a five-minute break from work.

Getting Academic

We actively encourage our staff to teach, lecture and publish in game-related areas. Gamelabbers teach at New York University and Parsons School of Design. They speak at conferences from the Game Developers Conference and E3 to DiGRA and SIGGRAPH. And they publish articles, books, and essays. These activities serve a number of purposes: Relationships with the universities help us find new talent; speaking and publishing helps create PR buzz for the company; and the research required to put a class together or write an article certainly enriches the knowledge base at Gamelab.

Do More Together

For a game company, almost any field trip or activity is genuinely relevant

research. The Gamelab soccer team learns about real-world game-play and social interaction every summer. Visual designers have put together sculpt-with-clay evenings and comic book projects. Staff members organize anime movie nights and paper game events for Gamelabbers and their friends. All of these events serve as bonding experiences for our team, in addition to their research benefits. We empower the staff to organize activities, funding and facilitating them whenever we can.

Be Unique

Beyond these more typical activities, we try to invent research opportunities that dovetail with the company culture. Every year at the Game Developers Conference, Gamelab creates a social game for thousands of attendees that serves as game design experimentation and guerrilla PR. A staff interest in community youth led to the Gamelab TEEN program, an ongoing mentorship program for high school students to learn about game design. These activities have concrete research benefits for the Gamelab staffers that are involved with them, even as they create great hooks for media coverage of our company.

Outside the Bounds

Committing to a culture of research means supporting your staff's endeavors outside your company. Gamelabbers have organized and taken part in circus theater productions, street game festivals, robot art exhibitions, original graphic novels, cosplay extravaganzas—you name it. We make every attempt to support and celebrate this work, even mentioning it in company press releases and bios. Your employees' lives should not be circumscribed by their work. The more interesting culture they consume and create outside of your company, the better games they will make for you.

Play Games!

In addition to all of these extra-curricular research activities, the key research that your staff undertakes is actually playing

games. Everyone at your company should play games: old games and new games, games on digital platforms and games made out of paper, games that are your direct competition and games that have nothing to do with your company's business. Work tasks always take precedence over this kind of play research, but at Gamelab, employees generally end up spending several hours a week just playing. This kind of activity serves many purposes for us, including competitive market analysis, technological research, and general design inspiration.

Any office is a nexus for the exchange of ideas, and at Gamelab we encourage staff to share the insights from their informal play research. A section of our intranet is reserved for posting links and thoughts about new games and game sites—and for posting pointers to strange internet culture. Furthermore, the open physical layout of our office lets us see what is happening on each others' screens, reducing the potential stigma of "playing at work" and encouraging discussions about games even as they are being played. The two of us make sure to join in these discussions and play games as well, so that everyone can see that there is nothing wrong playing and working at the same time.

So design your company culture. Our exact policies and activities might not be right for you. But however you decide to create your company culture, do so intentionally. You design experiences for game players. Design the experience of your company employees too.

The Final Word: Design For Play

As intangible as these intangibles are, they do not arise out of nothing. The attitudes and approaches we describe here are the result of very concrete policies and procedures. Less important than designing one specific approach over another specific approach is being sure to design these intangibles in the first place.

Any game is defined by its rules: those mathematical guidelines that tell you when to roll the dice and move your piece, when to draw a card and place a bet, how to level up your character and go fight more monsters. Rules taken by themselves can be dry and formal. But for a player, rules ultimately do not matter. What really matters is the play that the rules make possible. As much as rules are logical and rigid, the experience of play at its best is spontaneous, creative, and unpredictable. Games are made up out of rules. But they exist to create play.

Defining and designing how your company operates is a lot like creating a game. The policies you define, the tools you purchase, the way you lay out the workspace—these are the rules. The experience of your staff, and the products that emerge out of the functioning of your company are the play that come out of the rules you establish. The rules are important, but less so than what emerges out of them.

In any business field, there are a handful of leaders and dozens or hundreds—or even thousands—of imitators. And in a creative industry, being a leader means constant invention. The only way to assume that leadership and produce that sort of invention is to create an environment in which your company can start doing things and making things you could never have predicted in advance. We all know that the best games result in play patterns, game strategies, and fan cultures that none of us game developers could ever have predicted beforehand. And similarly, the best game companies also surprise us with the games that come out of them, games that shock us with never-before-seen game-play and graphics or incredibly elegant improvements on existing genres of play.

But great games like these can only emerge from a process of rules that was so well designed it surprised its creators. So design them for play, for results that you cannot yourself imagine. Otherwise, you have taken the play out of work. And playing at

work is why we all got started in the game business in the first place, right?

Peter Lee (peter@gamelab.com) is a digital media renaissance man, equally skilled in visual design, game design, and game programming. Peter began his career as a designer for TIME online, where he designed the award-winning web content feature *Last Call: Face of Alcoholism*. He has held a number of positions since then, including Director of Technology at Churchill Communications, a New Jersey-based medical communication company, where he managed web and CD-ROM projects and lead IT research and technical development. Peter also worked with the game division at Funny Garbage, developing several online games for the Cartoon Network website. He currently holds an Adjunct Professorship at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program and Parsons School of Design, and has lectured on the subjects of Game Design and Development.

Eric Zimmerman (eric@gamelab.com) is a game design addict. After a childhood of roping friends and family into playtesting his game experiments, Eric has spent the last thirteen years in the game industry. Before founding Gamelab with Peter Lee, Eric collaborated with Word.com on the underground online hit, *SiSSYFiGHT 2000*. Other pre-Gamelab titles include the PC CD-ROM games *Gearheads* (Philips Media, 1996) and *The Robot Club* (Southpeak Interactive, 1998). An unapologetic part-time academic, Eric has taught game design at MIT, NYU, Parsons School of Design, and School of Visual Arts. Eric is the co-author with Katie Salen of *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* and *The Game Design Reader* (MIT Press, 2003 & 2006). He is the co-editor with Amy Schulman of *RE:PLAY Game Design and Game Culture* (Peter Lang, 2003). Eric has exhibited non-game projects at galleries and museums in the US and abroad.

When staff have a genuine feeling of authorship over what they do, then they are not merely workers anymore: They become collaborators who care very much about the quality of the final product and about the company as a whole.



What's Your Story?

Creating a Sense of Urgency

How do you create a sense of urgency in a game so that a player feels compelled to play until the end? Though there are many ways to have players “attach” to a game without incorporating a story or characters, story and characters help—so long as the story is compelling and the player can vicariously live through the characters.

Story vs. No Story

One of the ongoing questions in the game business has been whether including a story in a game increases game-play or sales. You often hear that stories are a waste of money. “If it doesn’t sell more games,” so the argument goes, “why spend one dollar layering a story into the game?” Adding a story definitely costs additional money and time, but at the same time a good story can ground the design and get players hooked.

When I started producing games at The Learning Company, the games followed a spoke-and-hub model in which players would navigate to a new activity whenever they got bored with the one they were on. Though it drew a lot of groans, I dubbed it, aptly: Navigation by Boredom. Boredom was what stopped players in their tracks and made them want to return to the hub in order to click and play another activity until they got bored again. Little outside of boredom motivated the player to leave what they were doing and explore or re-explore another part of the game.

However, thanks to games such as *Pajama Sam* and *Putt Putt Saves the Zoo*, we discovered through child-testing that if you wrapped a compelling story around those very same activities, added a sympathetic protagonist, and the story unveiled over time, players would attack the game with purpose for upwards of 30 hours to bring the story to its conclusion.

What Is A Story?

Every game has a story. And it even has three acts. They may not exist in the traditional sense, but because the player’s experience of life is a kind of story, the story is there. Even games like tic-tac-

toe and solitaire can’t begin without the anticipation of playing and the hope of winning, which begins before the first “x” or “o” is drawn. Once playing, there is a period of time in the middle where the ending is uncertain, followed by a conclusion, and a deciding last move, at which point the game is resolved.

Games have a beginning, middle, and end, with emotional content at each phase:

- Act I: The decision by the player to play the game in the first place, which leads to players facing the unique game challenge, like matching up three colored balls to keep the snake from going down the drain. Yikes!
- Act II: Stuff in the middle, like power-ups, accelerating game-play, the twists and turns which become more complicated with each new level. The player may have self-doubt or get weary, but she coaches herself through it and musters the courage to go on. She rises to the occasion in her quest to be a hero and conquer the game. Even plunking down the 20 dollars is a kind of act of faith and courage, and the acid-test of a game being a hit. What if the rest of the game is awful? It’s part of her story.
- Act III: She wins! She beat the game or her opponent despite adversity, and emerged the winner, with bragging rights and all the honors she deserves. She looks back at the experience with pride and a sense of accomplishment. But then, sadly, (following Joseph Campbell’s hero paradigm), she returns to her office job at the end! That is, until the next download. . . .

One Way to Evaluate a Story

Humans tend to be concerned about the future and what’s going to happen next. That’s why we like to volley around answers to life’s absurd questions and dilemmas at the water cooler. Answers soothe us. (Heaven, it has been argued, was created as a story to soothe our fear of death.) You might even say that it’s this kind of anxiety

Kevin Richardson



“Adding a story definitely costs additional money and time, but at the same time a good story can ground the design and get players hooked.”

about the future combined with foresight that’s kept us alive through time. Little wonder, then, that the stories we care about hold our attention until their ultimate outcome is resolved.

Stories that grab our attention usually tap into the unique anxieties or challenges of being human. *Jaws*: Getting eaten alive. *Twin Towers*: Getting buried alive. *Carrie the Caregiver*: Caring for infants. *Diner Dash 2*: Losing everything you’ve worked for to greedy real-estate developers. A story often starts with an interesting question or dilemma that throws us off kilter. Unlike a novel, however, a game gives us some control over the outcome of the story,

thrusting us into the heart of the action and giving us the opportunity to step in and influence the outcome. Stuff may go wrong along the way, but a player will continue playing in order to set things right again. The story problem combined with foresight makes the player want to get involved and find out how the story ends. When you play *Diner Dash 2*, you don’t want to let the bulldozer (and evil developers) raze the café, do you? Of course not! You’d better keep playing and find out what happens next!

So what are some things that make up a compelling story? One theory is that storytelling is all about presenting the audience with a series of interesting questions which *eventually* will be answered. Those promised answers, dangled ahead of us like carrots on a stick, hold our attention—we simply *have* to know the answer or we’ll go nuts. If the questions are sufficiently intriguing—like “Will the diner get bulldozed?”—then we’ll play and play until we get part or all of the answer.

On the other hand, if the underlying questions in a story are not interesting enough—if we ultimately don’t care enough to find out the answers—we’re unlikely to keep playing for long. Characters similarly need to hold our interest, especially if a character we find sympathetic is in the crosshairs of the story problem.

The List

Several years ago I came upon a story writing analysis program called *Dramatica* (which, it turns out, remains alive and well in all its complexity on www.dramatica.com). From that program I developed my own subset of criteria which I use to evaluate the quality of a game’s underlying storyline. I call those criteria The List. The List helps me make informed decisions about game-play and art direction. It also aids in writing dialogue and executing animation. Put simply: I use The List to make my game stories richer—and to make sure there’s tension.

Granted, there is no “recipe” for a good story, as story decisions are subjective. But

it’s important to know the main building blocks that separate good stories from bad ones:

Problem: What is the interesting problem that makes your story worth telling? The test lies in this question: If a player does NOTHING, what will happen to the world and characters in the game? If the consequence of inactivity is troubling enough to make the player rise to action, you’ve got a good story problem.

Solution: What is it that will make the world right again? Is the solution to the problem intriguing? Typically, the solution informs the game design by dictating the kinds of things the player will need to earn, win, or acquire through the game-play mechanic. Successfully completing portions of the game or acquiring stuff through successful game-play can either advance a portion of the story (if it has several acts), or resolve the story altogether.

Back-story: What happened before the game began? What led up to the current predicament? The back-story will often inform game and story decisions, no matter how benign—the game will feel more solid if something from the past got us to the first moment of game-play. Some ancient civilization is behind the magic of *Zuma*, for example. The back-story can be delivered upfront, or sometime later, and it can be strictly visual or felt. Surprise works, too. The back-story may catch up to us in a third-act twist in which everything we thought we were working towards gets messed up and our goal changes entirely!

Goal: What does the player need to do to set things right? Get the amulet? Match a zillion marbles together? Before you answer this, it’s important to decide just how closely you want the game mechanic tied to your story. The tighter the

story and mechanic are, the harder it will be to get both right and to separate them later—it’s the simple rule of dependencies. But an independent story and mechanic (on the polar extreme) can lead to a contrived result—like matching marbles in order to save the diner. On the other hand, when the game and story are closely aligned, the results can be a very immersive and believable world, and a compelling player experience.

Consequences: This issue relates directly to the Problem: What will happen if you do nothing at all? Will the babies die or get sick (*Carrie the Caregiver*)? Will all of the Sproinklings make it to the surface (*Sproink*)? Will Tex Carter make it through the hall of doom (*TriPeaks Solitaire To Go*)? What is the consequence to the main story problem of never playing? And again, if the story problem is really strong, then the consequences of doing nothing should keep the player awake at night—and maybe compel her to plunk down \$19.99 after slurping down some coffee the next morning.

Forewarnings: These are the things that let the audience know that the story consequences are real and exist. The water is rising. The ground is shaking. More beetles are taking over the city. More babies are coming into the baby ward. Your salon is so popular you need to add more chairs, but you better get more tips to buy them. These Forewarnings could be a quick look at a growing crack in the dam which no-one



▲ *Dead Rising*

What's Your Story?

Creating a Sense of Urgency



▲ *Diner Dash 2*

◀ (top and bottom)
Tri-Peaks Solitaire To Go



sees, or it could be a mad scientist installing the final component in his doomsday device. These are the reminders that the story is real, that players need to take the story consequences seriously and invest in the story solution.

Limits: The function of story Limits is to create a sense of urgency for the player based on time or physical constraints. Without such Limits, there is no urgency. (Imagine a game that offers unlimited time and resources: What would be the challenge? or the point?) Urgency holds players' attention in their quest to keep the Consequences from happening. You can create an artificial "clock" that enables players to track where they are relative to the time and/or physical story limits. Maps are often used to show the limits of the meta game, for example, but the progress metaphor could just as easily have been a thermometer, a flagpole, a calendar, or the pieces needed to put the ancient idol back together. As players approach the maximum of each limit, the sense of urgency increases—and so does the fun.

Driver: Is the story advanced by actions or decisions? Is it physical or mental? Or

both? Brainy games (trivia, for example) put the tension more in the player's head, whereas arcade games rely more on hand-eye coordination. So what kind of story is best for your type of game? The hide-and-seek stories which involve the player's ability to discern one object from another lend themselves to the slower paced mystery stories, whereas breakout games or games with arcade action might be better paired up with a frenetic story and physical jeopardy. There is no established rule-of-thumb here, however. Consider EA's *TriPeaks Solitaire ToGo*, in which Tex Carter is subjected to every imaginable danger and punishment as you play. There's peril in every move, and mounting tension in an otherwise slow game with no physics.

Outcome: Like every other element of your story, the outcome should be seen through the eyes of the player. Players will believe that following the established rules will result in a successful ending, with the story problem resolved. They just need to work hard at whatever you tell them to work hard at. Inside the assumed outcome lie story possibilities. Red herrings and third-act twists can force the story to change directions in a logical but surprising way. Imagine, for example, that everything a player has done during the front half of the game has actually been helping the antagonist. What if it turns out that the

Much as music and art direction offer another emotional point of view for a particular scene or event, there are many devices at a game maker's disposal to deliver story content without the need of text or comic strips.

Developer in *Diner Dash 2* also owns the distributor that supplies food to the diner? What impact would that have on game-play? or on the player? How would this drive game design?

Main Character Concern: In games, the main character can be the player or an avatar protagonist, or both. In the best case *both player and protagonist* are concerned about the story problem. But there are always decisions for the storyteller to make: Should the player be concerned with the health of the babies in the baby ward, or with getting fired if one of the babies gets sick? (Maybe it's both!) Deciding what you want the protagonist to be concerned with at any given moment will drive different story decisions and how you develop your game assets. You may decide to have the protagonist concerned with the wrong things at first just to make an important story point. For example in the first act of *Dead Rising*, you're told to run for the stairs—doh!—even though the storytellers know that's going to get you attacked by zombies. How else are you going to learn you can't win the game without the help of comrades?.

Obstacle Character Concern: The obstacle character can be the antagonist who is out to stop the protagonist (the player or the main character). It could also be the "contagonist" (a *Dramatica* term) who

hinders the player or protagonist and can be aligned with either the protagonist or the antagonist. They (or it) are simply a nuisance. Whereas the antagonist might be the thing that can outright stop the player (the villain for example), contagonists could be tempting gems that give the player demerits while better, more valuable gems drop by the wayside.

Over the years, I have found this list to be extremely useful in evaluating stories for games and other media, strengthening the weak points and creating an overall cohesion and direction. Certainly, it offers the development teams a framework to have a coherent conversation about the story. It has also helped me consider how "full" a game experience is. At some level, players are always checking for answers

to these questions, even if the answer is "there's no story in this game at all." Also, it's not necessary to execute each story metric in literal terms. Much as music and art direction offer another emotional point of view for a particular scene or event, there are many devices at a game maker's disposal to deliver story content without the need of text or comic strips. The main idea is to satisfy players' emotional yearnings so that, while they play, they feel that they are participating in something larger and believable—and ultimately satisfying.

Needless to say, I did not include all of the story aspects from *Dramatica*. You will have fun going through the site and seeing if anything else could be helpful to your game and story development as you develop a List of your own.

Kevin Richardson is currently a consultant for the casual games business. He has produced over 30 "E" rated games, including the *Family Feud* games and several Hasbro titles at iwin.com. Kevin also worked as executive producer on numerous *Reader Rabbit* and *ClueFinders* adventures while at The Learning Company/Mattel Interactive. Kevin can be reached at krichardson123@yahoo.com or <http://www.linkedin.com/in/kevinrichardsonproducer>.



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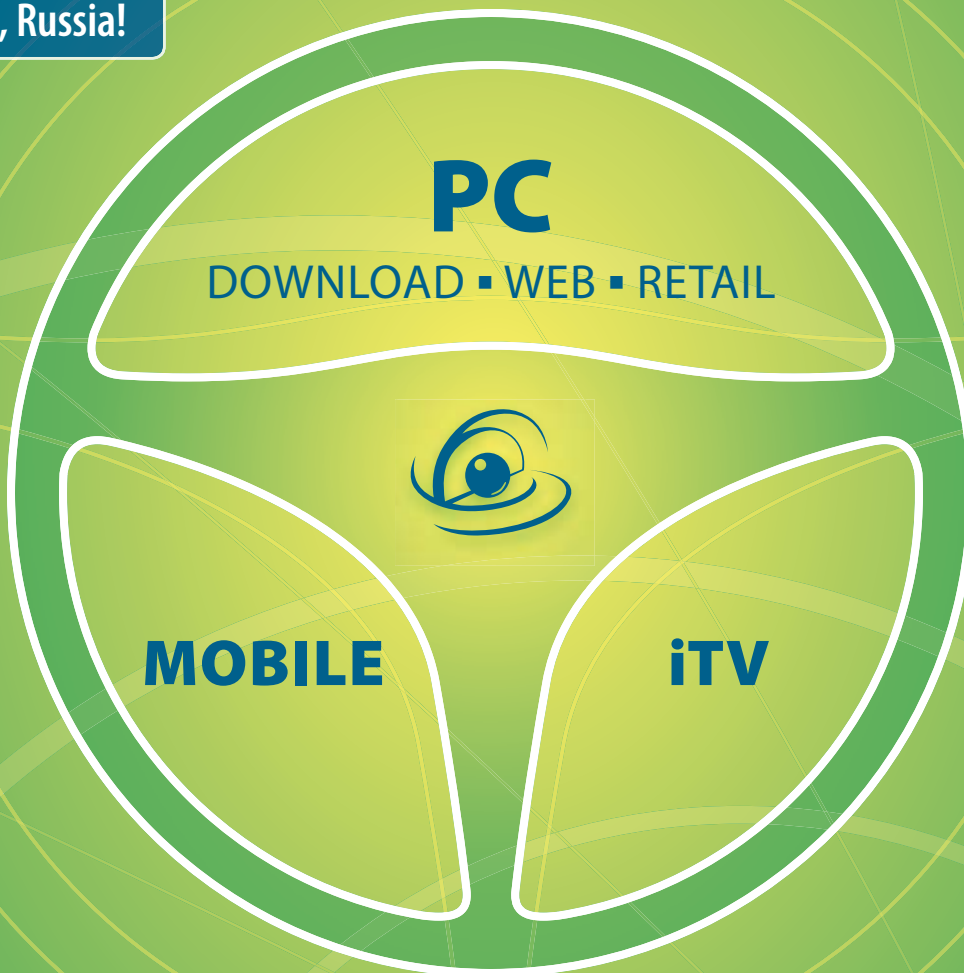


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Down to the Bone

Better Games through Deeper Themes

Beware: The Casual Games Industry is alive! And it grows larger with each passing day! Customers are now exposed to *hundreds* of casual games per year in a business seemingly modeled on viral infections. The exposure happens initially with no more than a game title and one or two innocuous screenshots. If the customers are intrigued, then they download the product, bringing it into their homes to play with. If all goes well, then they turn into paying customers. *Bwahahahah!*

The Necessary Evil

Only a tiny percentage of casual games rely upon known branding and licensed properties for their hook. And while the keepers of the portals profit from every sale, the chances of a particular game getting beyond a first impression grow slimmer with each sunrise. Customers cannot be expected to download and play a new game every day. Given a flood of options, most customers will stick with the familiar and with what they like.

For games to have a chance at success, developers embrace a necessary evil: Books must be judged by their covers. The title and screenshots—and *not* the game-play—are frequently all that customers will use to decide whether or not to try a casual game. Consequently, developers focus a lot

of energy on creating an appealing *theme* to hook the customers.

"My God, What Is It!?"

In general, a *theme* is the subject of an artistic work, or an implicit or recurrent idea¹. In a computer game, the theme is the unifying factor for the design of all components perceived by the game's audience, with particular attention paid to the environment in which the game appears to take place.

Theming a game is the act of setting the stage, creating a new world for the audience to play in. By establishing a theme, designers enter an agreement with their audience, an agreement in which both parties do their part to create a satisfying reality. The designers are responsible for creating sufficient detail to allow the audience to understand what it is observing. Designers must also maintain internal consistency for the world: Nothing should happen in this world that would jar the audience's expectations or break whatever suspension of disbelief is required to remain immersed in the world.

"They Just Keep Coming! There's Too Many!!"

Imagine this grim scenario: Jane creates a well-themed game with environments that she hopes will appeal to the game's

Andy Megowan

Look beyond games for most of your inspiration. See how your ideas have been tackled in film, television, books, art and architecture. You never know what interesting kernels of information will inspire you or become the seeds of new ideas.

audience. Several other developers follow suit. On the next game, Jane raises the production values and polishes the art style, but so do the other developers. She sells her soul to develop a great game and—28 days later—someone releases a game that is nearly identical in every way, but with a different theme. What's worse, although she did nothing wrong, the game comes out *after the clone* on some major portal, and Jane is seen as the shameless imitator.

What should Jane do? She could respond in kind, re-skinning her own game with a new theme (and theoretically becoming her own competitor). Such superficial theming would be relatively inexpensive compared to coming up with an entirely new game. It's a tempting response inasmuch as casual gamers often seem to clamor for "more of the same." The inherent danger in this strategy should be obvious, however. Such a step could easily end up alienating Jane's existing customers, who might see this re-skinned game as an attempt to sell them the same game twice!

Fortunately, there is a better way.



¹"Theme" Def. 2, 3. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., 2001



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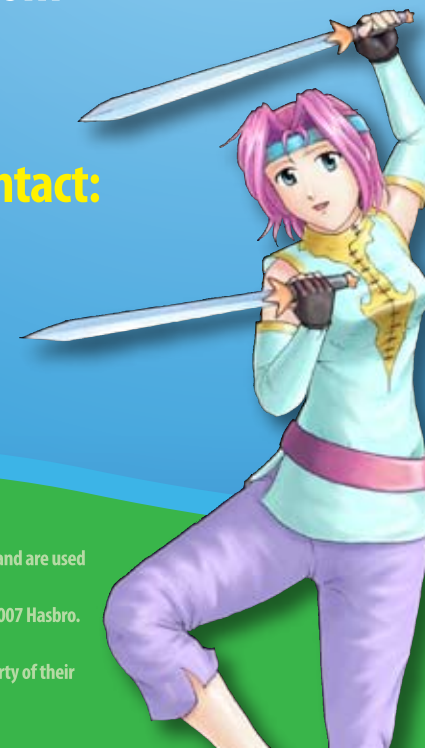
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Co-Founder & CEO, Gamelab

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Co-Founder, Jenkat Games

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Taking Your Themes Down to the Bone

Let's make a distinction. *Superficial* theming refers to designing game-play independently of the design of the assets. It is *asset agnostic*: The actual choice of theme is independent of any game-play design choices, and can be switched out without any engineering changes. In contrast, Jane's better alternative is to employ *integrated* theming, which means closely tying game-play to the theme. The information presented to the player, the actions that the player can take, and the outcomes of those actions all closely relate back to the theme.

Feel the Power

Integrated theming has many advantages because it deepens the aforementioned agreement between designer and audience. In addition to observing the environment, the audience now has expectations about the internal logic of the world and acts on those expectations to *learn more* about the world and *affect* it.

Deep theming also paves the way for internal consistency, which in turn makes immersion and the suspension of disbelief much easier for your audience. Doing these things creates *escapism* and encourages players to spend time with—and make repeat “visits” to—your game. Such “replay value” is the key to converting a potential customer into a paying customer. The actions associated with *working* on a computer—thinking, clicking, dragging, and typing—become *playing*.

A deeply themed concept can also provide long-term benefit to designers because it will suggest more subject matter and content than a designer can reasonably expect to fit in. The audience will be aware of this, and ideally will want to continue exploring and inhabiting that world. This opens the door to licensing and franchising—and opportunities to explore other aspects of the world in different genres and different media. (Not to overstate things here, but a complete world with internal consistency allows other content creators to grasp your intentions

Case Study: Zombies and Sporting Goods

We will apply some of the design tools outlined in this article in order to create the preliminary treatment for a casual game with an integrated theme. We know that, for our outcome, we want a fun game that can also feature a catchy theme that comes across easily in screenshots and a title. To get started, we'll start with three seed ideas: Zombies, Sporting Goods, and the match-three genre. And we will stipulate that we want a strong female protagonist.

Foundation

Figure 1 shows a cluster of ideas about Zombies. Figure 2 shows a cluster of ideas about sporting goods. A cluster of ideas about match-three is left to your imagination, but for this exercise we'll say that we latched on to one key match-three idea: moving objects around until you have three in a row (or column) is beneficial.

From Theme to Game-play

(Theme) As everybody knows, zombies are relatively stupid—which might suggest, for example, that they are unable to count beyond the number two.

- (Game-play) For a zombie, three objects in a row is the same as MANY objects in a row, and is therefore—to zombie logic—an impassable barrier.

(Theme) Zombies, individually, are not much of a threat. They're not smart, have no sense of self-preservation, move slowly, and are easy to outrun. But in large groups, they can be very dangerous—even fatal.

- (Game-play) If a defenseless human encounters a zombie, he will get bitten, and eventually become another zombie. However, if the protagonist has a weapon (a baseball bat, a golf club, or some other sporting good), she can fend off a bite. On the other hand, if she becomes trapped (all movement is blocked by zombies), she will become a zombie regardless of her weaponry.

(Theme) Retail stores are criss-crossed with aisles and filled with merchandise.

- (Game-play) Since match-three games are played on a 2D grid, an overhead view of a flat retail store provides an intuitive game-play environment in which the player can create escape routes and/or obtain weaponry.

(Theme) The Zombie/Sporting Goods combination strongly hinted at the characters in the cult film *Army of Darkness* starring Bruce Campbell. A bit of remembered knowledge, combined with some time with Google, Wikipedia and IMDB revealed that protagonist Ash's full name was actually Ashly “Ash” J. Williams. As a nod to the source material, we create our strong female protagonist as Ashley Campbell, former sporting goods cashier turned Professional Zombie Rekiller.

The new game will be called “Nnnnnngh!” (which is how zombies say “Sporting Goods!”). Imagine how much fun people will have simply telling their friends the name of the game that they just played.



Down to the Bone

Better Games through Deeper Themes

and aid in the creation of additional content for that world. Look at the richness of the *Star Wars* or *X-Men* universes, to which thousands of enthusiastic individuals have contributed over the decades.)

Finally, on the business side, integrated theming makes it very difficult for would-be imitators to create viable knock-offs, effectively limiting your competition. Take that, clones.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Commitment to designing a game with integrated theming will demand more upfront costs. With the tighter coupling of game-play and content, allow for a greater volume of communication between the design side and the asset creation side of your game. Spend more time on research into the theme, digging deeper for interesting elements that will deepen the experience or offer interesting game-play elements. Prepare to spend more time iterating and discovering what theming and game-play works, and also allow time for inspiration to hit.

At the back end of the project development cycle, there will be much less design work

to do, but the game will be much more closely tied to the theme. The risk is that a game with a niche theme may not have broad appeal—and it will be much more difficult to repackage if it fails. Those game-play elements tied to the theme will need to be redesigned, which will send shockwaves through the entire production process.

Brains! (How It's Done)

You may eventually approach deeply integrated theming in a way that works best for you, but here are some concepts and steps that will get you looking at your design with the right perspective.

1. Lay Your Foundation

The foundation of a solid game is formed by a set of Big Ideas. Don't worry about connections at first, but instead gather thoughts around each Big Idea and connections will start to form. Your thoughts and notes will be your connecting points, and the more you have, the more interesting connections you will eventually form—and the stronger will be the foundation of the game.

Remember that you can have multiple themes and multiple types of game-play within a single game.

2. Do Your Homework

Once you know what the big pieces and little pieces are, take a look at what others have done with those pieces. If other games have touched on your ideas, it would be wise to take a good look at those games and

be familiar with their strong points and weaknesses.

Look beyond games for most of your inspiration. See how your ideas have been tackled in film, television, books, art and architecture. Dig deeper with Google, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), Wikipedia, and even bookstores and libraries. You never know what interesting kernels of information will inspire you or become the seeds of new ideas.

3. Assemble Your Materials.

Identify information that establishes the theme. You may start with brainstormers that will lead you to eventually do deeper research here. Then identify characteristics, actions and events that take place around the theme.

Identify information that establishes the game-play. Identify possible game objects, characteristics, and actions that take place around your game-play ideas.

4. Establish a Design Feedback Loop Between Game-Play and the Theme

The game loop, mentioned earlier, is a dialogue between player and game that goes as follows:

- The game updates all information about the state of the game objects.
- The game provides the player with any relevant information about the state.
- The player observes and analyzes the data. This includes checking his expectations about the results against the actual results.
- The player chooses a new desired outcome, and formulates a method for realizing that outcome.
- The player puts the method into action by interacting with the game.
- The game receives the player's information and repeats this loop.

The structure of this loop dictates the kinds of information that you should look for as you establish a two-way dialogue between what constitutes your theme and what constitutes your game-play. Start with either

one and find information that influences the other.

From the information about the theme:

- Find **static elements** that establish setting, tone, and play boundaries. See if some of them can become background elements. In the classic game *Diner Dash*, the setting is the interior of contemporary dining establishments. Elements include a large, open dining area viewed at an angle from above and a collection of interesting dining facilities and food preparation equipment (such as coffee machines and a short-order cook). *Virtual Villagers* required a larger outdoor area with natural physical boundaries. Elements included tropical vegetation, bodies of water, crude engineering and construction, and privacy-granting homes.
- Find **objects**, both tangible and intangible, that can be altered through the course of a game. See if some of them can be turned into in-game objects. In *CakeMania*, the main objects are the player character, the customers whose orders she must take, the machinery that she operates to fulfill the orders, and the cakes themselves.
- Find **characteristics** of these objects that a player might find interesting or entertaining to observe and affect. Bring some over as object data, and try to imagine the player enjoying the manipulation of this data. In *Master of Defense*, the enemies have just a few properties that players care about: health, what defenses they are vulnerable to, speed, distance to the player's home base, and how much damage they can do when they arrive. The player affects these stats through defensive emplacements that can target nearby enemies and reduce their health and speed.
- Find **events** that force the characteristics of the objects—and the objects themselves—to change. Events may be



▲ *Diner Dash*



▲ *Agatha Christie's Death on the Nile*

caused by the player, or may be caused by the game in order to force the player to react. Bring some over to the game and see if they add any interest or engagement when they change. The word game *Bookworm Deluxe* notes when players are making easy, short words. In response, the game triggers "burning letter" events that force the player to create longer words as well as words that use the burning letters before the library burns down.

- Find **actions** that the player might enjoy performing. Actions can be purely for fun, but the majority should be events that affect the objects. In hidden object games such as *Agatha Christie™ Death on the Nile*, the simple act of flushing a specific object out of hiding by clicking on it can be immensely satisfying.

From the information about game-play:

- Find **data** that you want the player to observe and understand. Some of it may be pure decoration, but decoration can establish the tone and the right frame of mind for the player. See if the data maps to any objects or characteristics within the theme.
- Find **choices** that you want the player to make. See if some of them relate to actions that would take place as part of the theme.
- Find **interactions** that the player should perform. See if there are any aspects of the player's actions that map well to the theme's actions and events.
- Find **outcomes** that would result from events and player interactions. Look at the characteristics and events that are part of the theme, and see if any could make sense within that theme.

5. Be Aware of the Fourth Wall.

In staged performances such as plays, musicals, and television shows, the set usually consists of rooms with a floor and three walls, with the audience and cameras located where the fourth wall would normally be. Performers must maintain the fiction of a fourth wall without ever explicitly acknowledging its existence. When this is done well, the audience is transported to the world of the stage as invisible spectators.

Keep players engrossed and immersed in the game's reality through *consistent*, *logical* and *seamless* choices, interactions, and outcomes. If there's a hiccup—an awkward change or inconsistent behavior—then players may be jolted into awareness that they are sitting in front of a computer, fiddling with controls, watching a screen and playing a game. That's when they usually stop playing.

We're Safe . . . for Now

Designers and customers alike benefit from deep, integrated themes. Create games, worlds and interactions that are uniquely your own, and you will frustrate your potential imitators before they get started. With a little more work at the front-end of production, designers can take steps to deliver great, inimitable games that bring customers back again and again, begging for more.

Bwhahahahah!

Andy Megowan is the Creative Director at iWin Division 90, a studio in Seattle. He has been producing and programming games since 1979 at such companies as Interplay, Sega, ION Storm, Monolith, and Sandlot Games. You can contact him at amegowan@iwin.com.



◀ *Cake Mania*

◀ (below) *Virtual Villagers*

▼ *Master of Defense*



Surviving the Industry

Building a Sustainable Business in a Hyper-Competitive, Hit-Driven Market

The casual games industry has experienced tremendous growth and change over the last five years. The analysts' growth assessments and projections indicate an industry ripe with opportunities: over \$700 million in online revenues in 2005 with a projected \$2.25 billion by 2008. Clearly there are vast opportunities for developers, publishers, and distributors as the marketplace continues to expand. But while the economic opportunity has grown, so has the number of competitors and the competitive challenges—challenges which grow more onerous as each day passes.

When we started Big Fish Games five years ago, we started as a small studio focused on low-budget games, and we took our games to every distributor that would carry them. After crafting a few hit games, we had the momentum and cash flow to continue driving our business forward. In the following five years, we also established Big Fish Games as a world-leading distribution site—a move that enabled our business to ride out slow periods and removed our reliance on the revenue produced by hit releases from our own studios.

The Challenges of a Maturing Market

Back in 2002, the casual games industry was blessed with a low barrier to entry for both studios and distribution sites. While low budget games that cost under \$10,000 to produce can still generate a reasonable return, there is an increasing tide of largely undifferentiated content. In contrast to 2002, the typical hit game can now cost several hundred thousand dollars to produce, and the chances of creating a hit break-away title are getting smaller and smaller.

In the past year, analysts state the industry grew roughly 30%, yet the number of titles submitted to us for distribution has more than doubled. Thus, the higher financial cost of casual game development today is exacerbated by increased competition. There are more competitors than ever vying for the mindshare of casual gamers—and those gamers are not keeping pace.

To make matters worse for game developers, the days in which a studio could generate meaningful, supplemental revenue from its own website have all but vanished. There are more well-established major game portals than ever before—each with a strong base of repeat customers and recognized, trusted brands—all vying for the same group of consumers. The large number of casual game distributors includes almost all of the biggest names on the Internet along with a variety of well-funded, scrappy startups. The big distributors spend millions on advertising and marketing to drive customers to download and buy games at their sites and millions more to retain those customers over time. For game studios to survive, they need to consistently produce hit games—but as stated earlier, this has become less than predictable and a very high-risk proposition.

None of this means that there is no room for a new studio to enter and succeed, or for existing studios to continue to grow. However, the formula for success has changed dramatically since Big Fish Games entered the market five years ago.

Mitigating the Risk

The challenge for an ambitious studio is to lower the volatility of revenue inherent with game development. One way developers mitigate this risk is with “work-for-hire” arrangements. While these subcontractor relationships provide a certain level of stability, they do not leave room for innovation and they limit the upside potential enjoyed by a truly independent studio.

Another way for a development studio to pay the bills is to monetize the traffic that may flow to its website when consumers seek out its popular titles through search engines. However, attempting to establish an ongoing relationship and meaningful lifetime financial return from these consumers means competing directly with the entrenched, well-funded portals. Given the size, focus, experience, and

Paul Thelen



“The typical hit game can now cost several hundred thousand dollars to produce, and the chances of creating a hit break-away title are getting smaller and smaller.”

financial power of these portals, a studio pursuing this path may find this option undesirable once it discovers the level of investment required—not to mention the inherent distraction that results when you divert your attention from innovative game development in order to focus on marketing instead.

An easier and less distracting approach to monetizing online traffic is to turn the studio's website into an affiliate of a larger distributor. This option enables the studio to offer a broad range of games merchandised through an external content feed. The problem with affiliate programs, however, is that the economic returns from

such solutions have not historically lived up to the promise because of the affiliate's inability to retain customers. Although things often look rosy in the first few months with a small but growing revenue stream, eventually revenue flat-lines, and the optimistic early projections of growth fall short. First-time visitors to the site roughly equal to the number of customers leaving each day and never returning, resulting in what is sometimes referred to as the “acquisition equals churn” phenomenon.

Creating a Mutually Beneficial Affiliate Program

The problem with traditional affiliate programs is that neither the affiliate nor the distribution portal takes full ownership of the customer relationship—because neither party has the ability to do so. Whereas it is in the interest of the affiliate to keep customers on its own site, it is not equipped to fend off the established portal's efforts to pull customers away. The two parties end up fighting over rather than cultivating the customer relationship—and as a result, their business relationship is based on one-time transactions. So even though the affiliate may have accomplished its goal of giving its customers a reason to return to its site often, the net effect of the program may be to drive traffic (eventually) to the portal—without (and here's the kicker) necessarily increasing the popularity of the affiliate's own games.

One solution to this problem is to make the portal and the affiliate true partners—to create a scenario in which both parties profit when a shared customer makes additional purchases. One way to achieve this is to align the long-term interests of the affiliate and the distributor so that they quit competing for the same customer and rather work together to maximize (and share) customer lifetime value. In Big Fish Games' Principal Network Partner (PNP) program, for example, the affiliate site focuses on building its brand and attracting customers organically while Big Fish Games works to retain and up-sell those customers.

Whatever revenue each customer generates is shared by both the affiliate and Big Fish, regardless of where the transaction takes place.

Both the affiliate and the portal must make a leap of faith for such a relationship to work since they must: a) trust each other to fill their assigned roles effectively; and b) give up a portion of the revenue they do not currently have to share. The underlying assumption, however, is that as a consequence the lifetime value of the average customer will increase—to the mutual benefit of both partners. And for the affiliate, that value could be substantial. It might mean, for example, that instead of getting 40% of a single game purchase from one customer it might get 25% of everything that customer purchases for the next several years. The benefit for the portal, of course, is that the affiliate will continue to feed it a steady supply of such customers on a daily basis.

Implications for the Industry

The initial feedback on this new kind of affiliate program is very encouraging. Early efforts of current participants have

universally resulted in expanding customer bases and growing revenue streams. As those trends continue, the promise of the affiliate concept will finally be fulfilled: Game-specific revenue will truly become a non-factor in keeping independent studios afloat. They will be able to take on riskier projects, build more elaborate games, and live the dream of building what they want to build without worrying about how they are going to keep the lights on at the office.

Paul Thelen, Big Fish Games Founder and CEO, has an MBA from Stanford University and a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of Washington. Prior to founding Big Fish Games in 2002, Paul worked at RealNetworks as Director of Consumer Marketing, where he wrote the business plan for RealArcade, an online game distribution service. Paul's latest venture, Big Fish Games, has become a top casual game site worldwide and is a leading publisher and developer of content. Big Fish Games' rapidly growing customer base downloads over 500,000 games per day. Paul can be reached at paul.thelen@bigfishgames.com.

Do you have the tools needed to survive a hyper-competitive industry?





Play in Our Neighborhood.

Sandlot Games®, headquartered in Bothell, Washington, is the world's premier developer and publisher of casual and family-friendly games. Sandlot Games boasts a captivating portfolio of popular game titles and franchises, including *Cake Mania*™, *Tradewinds*® and *Super Granny*®.

Let Us Publish Your Game

Have a great game? We'll help you make it a huge success.

Contact us about publishing and distributing YOUR casual game. Sandlot Games reaches millions of game players worldwide through a variety of distribution channels including online, PC, PDA's, handhelds, videogame consoles and mobile phones.

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Work in Our Neighborhood

Sandlot Games is growing! We are looking for talented folks to join our team. Developers, producers and marketers, apply by sending your resume to jobs@sandlotgames.com.



Standards for Online & Multiplayer Games¹

A Casual Connect Seattle Session Round-Up

There's no question that the casual game market is moving to produce more online and multiplayer content. Considering our industry's notorious conversion rates, one need only look at Pogo or the plethora of micro-transaction-based games in Asia to see that the other side of the pasture may, in fact, be greener. Many leaders of our industry have been predicting that "this will be the year of multiplayer" for years, but these prophecies have yet to come to pass. What is holding us back?

One factor restraining growth may be a lack of best practices that could help reduce stakeholder disagreements. To begin establishing these best practices, I helped organize a session at this year's Casual Connect Seattle with industry leaders from top game studios and portals—including **Margaret Wallace** (Rebel Monkey), **Bryan Bouman** (HipSoft), **Eric Zimmerman** (Gamelab), **Dave Williams** (MTVN/Shockwave), **Jim Greer** (Kongregate), **Scott Austin** (Microsoft), and **Ted Woolsey** (RealArcade), along with the moderator, **Adeo Ressi** (from my company, Game Trust). This article serves as a round-up of what I thought were the key points brought forward during that session.

Why All the Fuss About Online and Multiplayer Games?

With such a variety of participants representing companies of different sizes and strategies, it comes as no surprise that there were quite a few disagreements. However, everyone seemed to agree that the market is moving towards online and multiplayer content. "We tried to take *Bridge* down (from our service), and we had suicide threats—from 80-year-old people, homebound in Canada," explained Microsoft's Austin. "*Bridge* has become such an important part of their life, it's unbelievable." Even RealArcade, which is known mostly for its prowess in the download market, has begun testing a multiplayer service of its own in China. According to RealArcade's Woolsey, "we are very encouraged by what we've seen there . . . we've seen steady growth in our concurrent usage."

At the same time, the developers seemingly can't move fast enough to fill the demand. Almost half of Gamelab's titles currently in production are multiplayer, as opposed to none just one year ago. According to Eric from Gamelab, "already in the digerati circles, 'Web 2.0' is kind of a passé buzz word that everyone knows about, and if you're not on the bandwagon, you're being left in the dust. The game industry is definitely playing catch-up in that regard." In addition, Rebel Monkey's Wallace pleaded, "the casual game industry as a whole—we're not moving fast enough in this direction. I mean, what is holding us back?"

If You Build It, They Will Come

One may argue that it's a lack of tools provided by the portals that is "holding us back"—but that hasn't stopped developers from uploading and hosting 10 multiplayer games on Kongregate without any multiplayer API. Nor has it prevented companies like HipSoft from building online and multiplayer features into games like *Flip Words 2*. "I love hosting it, and I would actually be scared of someone else hosting because I'd want to go over their architecture," HipSoft's Bouman explained. "Even if they're a big company, I still want to make sure it's done right."

It's only a matter of time before the portals do provide these robust services to the developers—they obviously want to maintain control over the user experience and not rely on several different backends. Kongregate, Microsoft, and Shockwave already offer simple APIs because, as Austin pointed out, "every game needs to have a friends list, authentication, and billing or ad-serving. . . . I think it's absolutely necessary for the portals to provide those technologies and services to the developers so each developer doesn't have to repeat it."

However, the current APIs are of the single-player variety, to create "Pogo"-like communities around the games—an important distinction that Williams from Shockwave made. "We look at that as one potential model where we want to create

Jonathan Greechan

some connective tissue between all the games that are on our sites," he said.

So why haven't the portals provided multiplayer APIs—if this is, in fact, where the market is headed? According to Woolsey from RealArcade, "we just can't work fast enough." What's more, it can be hard for portals to navigate this new and complex landscape. As Shockwave's Williams explained, this "is a lot more complicated for us because it often means letting go of the community, and potentially building somebody else's community—a developer's community—or even someone else who potentially could become a competitor to us. So that's a really tough thing for us to get our heads around—that's a real big challenge in the market right now."

Different Models for Different Folks

Zimmerman pointed out that "online games present very different kinds of relationships with portals than single-player games do"—and with different relationships come different responsibilities. Throughout the discussion, three distinct deal relationships for online and multiplayer games were discussed: a Partnership Model, a Distribution Model, and an Affiliate Model.

Partnership Model

This model is very similar to a typical publisher/developer relationship. In most cases the developer will receive funding in exchange for exclusivity or even IP, and it will develop the game using the portal's backend. The portal then handles the hosting and billing, and a large amount of data is shared between both parties.

This is more complicated than a typical download publishing deal—but the consistent user experience that is created is very attractive for portals, and the upfront cash and technical support can be a boon to developers too. However, with these deals the developer is usually tied to one

Standards for Online & Multiplayer Games¹

A Casual Connect Seattle Session Round-Up

portal, which is not always a good thing. As Wallace pointed out, “A lot of developers are developing their own backends independently because if they work with a certain API that is provided by a portal then they feel like, ‘I’m not stuck, but I’m going to be working with this portal, and what happens if my IP gets buried in this portal?’”

Distribution Model

When the developer creates an online or multiplayer game for syndication on multiple sites, this is the Distribution Model. In most cases, the portal would be expected to host these games and provide easy tools for developers to integrate with generic services like registration, high scores, and chat. However, it’s definitely not always so cut and dried—the responsibilities become very tricky depending on the type of game. For example, a “massively single-player” or multiplayer card game could theoretically plug into portal services rather easily, whereas a multiplayer game with light persistence—in which the lobby system or backend is integral to the game—can be a different beast altogether. For this reason there can be no definitive division of responsibilities for games using the Distribution Model—they simply need to be handled on a case-by-case basis.

The billing responsibility in such arrangements can also be tricky, depending on the game. For the most part, the portal will likely require integration with its billing system because, as RealArcade’s Woolsey put it, “users get really confused if you have multiple points of e-commerce taking place. So we’re trying to think more from a consumer’s standpoint, and make it more holistic.” However, some portals may be willing to compromise. As Shockwave’s Williams explained, “we recognize that it simply isn’t technically feasible in many cases, and it certainly doesn’t fit with the business models of a lot of developers out there who we like to do business with.”

Affiliate Model

The Affiliate Model probably offers both the largest risk and largest reward for

developers. *Runescape* and *Club Penguin* are prime examples of the possibilities. As Zimmerman explained, “The most successful community-based games have a single community—a single URL where people go.”

With the Affiliate Model, the developer generally hosts the game on its backend through a white-label solution. A portal may ask for segregated lobbies and varying amounts of branding, but the developer runs the community, billing, and is the general interface to the consumer. This model is most used for MMOs, and even lighter multiplayer games with elements of persistence. While there are exceptions, the developer is generally not expected to integrate any community services, because, as Kongregate’s Greer explained, “at that point the backend of it is so integral that the developer should probably host it.”

It should also be noted that not all portals are receptive to these arrangements—which is understandable considering the risk of customer-loss inherent to affiliate deals. In this forum, Shockwave and Kongregate were open to these opportunities, while Microsoft and RealArcade were non-committal. Developers should also acknowledge that affiliate deals come with significantly different contract terms, because, as Shockwave’s Williams pointed out, “those are really marketing relationships at that point. You’re really using my portal and my audience as a marketing vehicle.”

Deal or No Deal

So how does a developer choose which model to pursue? Wallace offered some advice by saying, “I really think it ties into your business goals . . . and where you see yourself as a developer, in terms of the value chain.” And while every game might not fall neatly into one of these three models, choosing a model puts you in a much better position to get a deal done. As Williams explained, “It’s important to be clear right out of the gate, because the moment you try to blend things, you run

into a lot of problems trying to figure out what the deal is.”

Where, Oh Where, Has My Data Gone?

The discussion wrapped up with the always interesting topic of data-sharing. Both sides have valid points in this argument: On the one hand, the developer needs data in order to make better games; and on the other hand, the portals are providing the audience, and the data derived from that audience can be their competitive advantage. But in the online and multiplayer realm, it may be more valuable to see how a developer’s one game is used, as opposed to aggregate data. This data does not provide any competitive advantage for the portal, while it can significantly help the developer improve its game and design new content—which ultimately benefits all parties involved. All four portals were in agreement here—so we can definitively say that in-game usage data for online and multiplayer games should be shared, with varying levels of disclosure depending on the relationship model used.

Cue the Orchestra . . .

My biggest takeaway from this discussion is that, in this nascent sector of our industry, there still isn’t a straight line between point A and point B. I think Zimmerman put it best when he said, “If you look at other media—books, film, television, music—there are ‘corporate boy-band’ stadium concerts, but there are also still small record labels and digital distribution of music—and it’s that kind of ecosystem that keeps a popular cultural medium healthy. So I’m glad that there’s a variety of ways that we can work with portals.”

At the same time, this forum allowed both developers and portals, both big and small, to discuss their viewpoints and even come to agreement on some best practices for what remains a somewhat uncharted territory.

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- Since our network is the biggest, we can drive the most qualified sales of your games. We also provide competitive royalties and fair advances for qualified, published titles.
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SALLY'S SALON



POSH SHOP

Creating Innovation in Our Neighborhood

A Look Inside Sandlot Games

The casual games industry has made game creation fun again. Twenty years ago, video games emerged via pure genius of industry titans such as Nolan Bushnell and Will Wright. This innovation has slowly been diluted in the traditional games industry through big-budget remakes, sequels and derivatives of games that target 18-to-24-year-old males. What these games lack in innovation, they make up for in violence, high-end graphics, and Hollywood brand recognition.

Casual game development, in some ways, is heading back to the basics with easy to grasp, addictive games. Over the past five years, an entirely new market has emerged around this type of casual game. Catering heavily to women—and men outside the hardcore gaming arena—this emerging market is pushing the limits of games and how they’re delivered to the consumer, capitalizing on an entirely new revenue stream. But at the center of the storm is pure innovation. In a try-before-you-buy model in which virtual shelf space is granted to top-converting titles, a game will live or die on its own merits. While purely derivative games can make money in the casual gaming space, innovative games that capture a gamer’s imagination and strike a unique chord will be more successful, irrespective of secondary factors such as whether or not it’s tied to some known consumer brand, celebrity, or marketing program.

So what exactly does innovation mean in the casual gaming market? At Sandlot Games, we believe innovation in gaming is literally the product of creative design and understanding your core demographic. Without those key elements, it’s nearly impossible to produce something great. And as all successful companies will tell you, fostering creativity and understanding customer feedback are equally important. By encouraging creativity among our teams, and having a strong sense of what our players want to play and why, we’ve been able to successfully develop and distribute a variety of popular games, including the first

successful strategy casual game franchise, *Tradewinds*, and the most downloaded casual game of 2006, *Cake Mania*¹.

We often get asked, “What’s the secret?” Honestly, there is no secret. I simply believe that our entire staff has an incredible amount of creative energy to harness and, given the right environment and proper guidance, it can be channeled to create great games. From producers to marketing managers, everyone is encouraged to offer creative feedback at Sandlot.

Traditionally it’s hard to tell if you’ve created something really special until you offer it up for public consumption. And few truly innovative offerings are created out of whole cloth—the proverbial bolt of lightning or flash of brilliance. It is much more often an iterative process. By having a strong design that you stand behind and believe in, being creative and evaluating all user feedback, you drastically increase your chances of delivering an innovative and enjoyable game. The best way to demonstrate this is to briefly evaluate the creation of two of Sandlot’s most popular franchises: *Tradewinds* and *Cake Mania*.

Take the Long View

When we started *Tradewinds*, we were three guys working in the vacant upstairs bedroom of my townhouse in 2004. The Casual Games industry was mostly about jewel-matching at that time. Early on, we had decided that the traditional way of looking at a casual game was flawed. A casual game is not about a certain game-play style, like three-match. Most video games can be made casual by introducing a gentle learning curve to grasp the game’s pattern, rewarding positive behavior, and slowly injecting new game-play elements that enrich the playing experience. *Tradewinds*, at its heart, is based on an old game called Taipan, which we had played in the ‘80s. It is an economic simulation, with some light combat thrown in. We believed it was a system we could build on.

Granted, there was no other casual title that we could point to at the time and say

Daniel Bernstein



“We believed that casual gaming was going to evolve and consumers were interested in a deeper...more engaging gaming experience.”

that this was the right decision to make. With the addition of role-playing elements, we pushed the game into even more of an unknown, but we felt we needed to enrich the basic “buy low, sell high” game dynamic. Our approach was to gently introduce the player to the more hardcore aspects of the game and de-emphasize combat so that you couldn’t die within the first few hours of playing. As in *Westward*, we built a tutorial that walks players through a story, gently guiding them in all aspects of game-play without it feeling like a learning experience.

At the heart of deciding to build *Tradewinds* was a belief that casual gaming was going to evolve and consumers were interested in a deeper and more engaging

gaming experience. We weren’t going to compromise our design philosophy for what games seemed to be selling at the time, since we wanted to take a longer view of the market and were willing to bet the company on that hunch.

Following those same instincts, we will soon be introducing a massively multi-player online (MMO) version of *Tradewinds*—which we consider the first casual MMO ever. . . .

Find the Gnomes

When we decided to build *Cake Mania* in 2005, I originally envisioned a game focusing on ice cream. Three separate conveyor belts would push cups and cones, ice cream scoops and toppings. After further discussions with the producer, there was concern over the depth of the game, and the team decided to change themes. *Cake*, with its variety of shapes and layers, was believed to be the most interesting. And thus, *Cake Mania* was born.

With this basic premise, many of the game design objectives could be clearly outlined by the team. The original game design document included most of the finer details, such as the customer interaction, price, cake creation, and machinery stats. This helped set the basic framework of the game and establish some guidelines before development began. In the meantime, I built out our development team in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Once the artists were selected, we encouraged them to rely on their talent and creativity to generate the look and feel of the game. The end result was the birth of Jill Evans. The team was determined

to create a strong female protagonist, a character that was empowering and confident, someone that female players could associate with. We went so far as to create an entire history for Jill—what movies she liked, her hobbies, education, etc.

As art and development came together to produce the initial build, it was time to focus test the game-play. Focus testing is an important part of our overall development process inasmuch as it serves as the baseline reality check with our customers. Many a game has been radically altered and many more have been downright scrapped as a result of focus test feedback.

During our external focus test, Sandlot fans played the game, broke it down, and identified what was working and what wasn’t. Prior to focus testing we had added a feature to the game—gnomes that steal cakes as you make them. Our producer was particularly excited about this feature—we felt it would help “spice up” the game-play. After reading the focus test results, however, it was obvious that the gnomes did the opposite—they annoyed and frustrated our players. So we cut the gnomes. To this day, “gnome” is part of our game development vocabulary: It is a feature that looks cool on paper but uniformly annoys and frustrates our audience.

Conclusion

There is tremendous opportunity in the casual gaming market. We are in the bottom of the first inning in terms of content and game-play, and we’re just beginning to explore how these games are delivered and what features we can offer customers. By utilizing valuable feedback

from both staff and focus testing to determine if our ideas are likely to resonate with our consumer base, we’ll continue to develop innovative games that change the market and keep us at the forefront of design innovation—even as casual games continue to mature with the evolving tastes of our audience.

Daniel Bernstein established Sandlot Games and has served as founder and CEO since its inception in 2002.

“Many a game has been radically altered and many more have been downright scrapped as a result of focus test feedback.”



What Has Become of Innovation?

A Brief History of Innovation in Casual Games

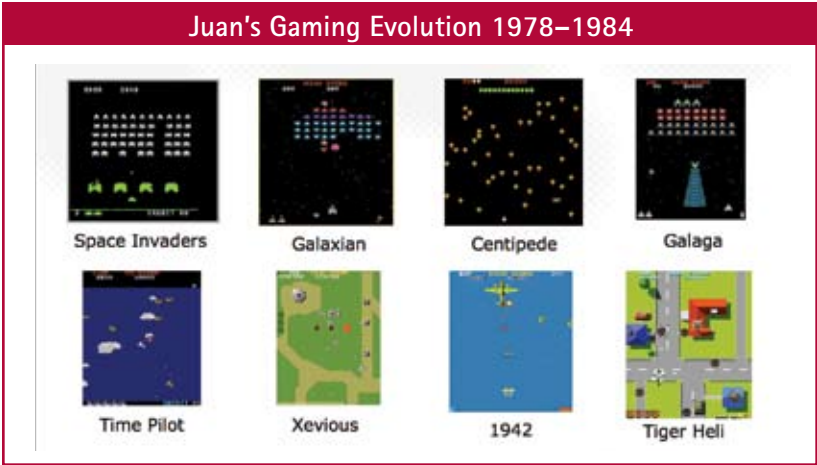
A couple of months ago I started looking into the evolution of casual games, from the year 2000 until today. I started comparing the public’s perception of a game (measured by its sales) to the critical perception. And what I noticed was an interesting parallel between the evolution of casual games and the first few years of the arcade video game industry. This article summarizes what I found.

The first thing I looked into is why casual players seem to buy the same genres over and over. Is this a recent phenomenon or something that has happened before? I began my research by examining a subject I knew very well. . . .

Space Invaders got me hooked into videogames. Back then, I didn’t know anything about game design, of course. But I didn’t care.

A year later THE game was *Galaxian*. *Galaxian* was a game that had its own innovative elements, but it was based on the core mechanic originally seen in *Space Invaders*. Even so, I played—and enjoyed—*Galaxian* . . . a lot.

Didn’t I care for innovation? Was innovation irrelevant to me when I knew very little about game design? To find out, I decided to compile a list, looking at the games I played in the first few years of videogaming at the arcades.



Nothing but space shooters. I was playing them because they had a fun game mechanic, I was good at them, and winning was rewarding to me. I remained engaged because there was really something new in each game I was playing.

Match-Three Game Evolution, 2001

To see if I could find a similar pattern of preferences among casual game players, I decided to create a list of match-three hits from recent years. To qualify for my list, a game had to have spent four weeks or more on RealArcade’s Top Ten list.

Turns out that when you clean out the list, and only look at the match-three hits, in most cases each one has a unique feature. Casual games have been innovating, incrementally anyway. But is incremental innovation sufficient?

Match-Three Hit Games on RealArcade

2001	<i>Diamond Mine (Bejeweled)</i>
2002	<i>Super BounceOut, Cubis Gold</i>
2003	<i>Tip Top, High Roller, Mind Your Marbles, Walls of Jericho, Chainz</i>
2004	<i>Bounce Out Blitz, Jewel Quest, Mad Caps, Cubis Gold 2, Bejeweled 2</i>
2005	<i>Big Kahuna Reef, Chuzzle, Bewitched, Chainz 2, Gem Shop, Rainbow Web</i>
2006	<i>Legend of Aladdin, Wonderlines, 7 Wonders, Da Vinci Code, Sky Bubbles, Jewels of Atlantis, Treasure Island, Diamond Detective</i>

Juan Gril



“*Space Invaders* got me hooked into videogames. Back then, I didn't know anything about game design, of course. But I didn't care.”

“Incremental innovation is a good thing—a great thing. After all, it's what most players feel comfortable with. Still, it seems that there was a lot more radical innovation 20 years ago than there is today, and that's a little worrisome.”

Looking Back to Look Forward

I decided to create a list of unique arcade games available in 1984 (six years after *Space Invaders*) and compare it with unique casual games in 2006 (six years after).

Arcade Games List, 1984

To qualify for this list, an arcade game had to meet several requirements:

- The game was released in 1984.
- The game was the most popular of that particular genre in that year.
- No games with same game mechanic were allowed, irrespective of theme.
- Themes could be duplicated as long as the game mechanics were different.
- In the case of arcade games, ergonomic differences made a different game (so if a racing game, for example) was controlled with a joystick, and another had three screens in a cockpit, it was considered a different game).

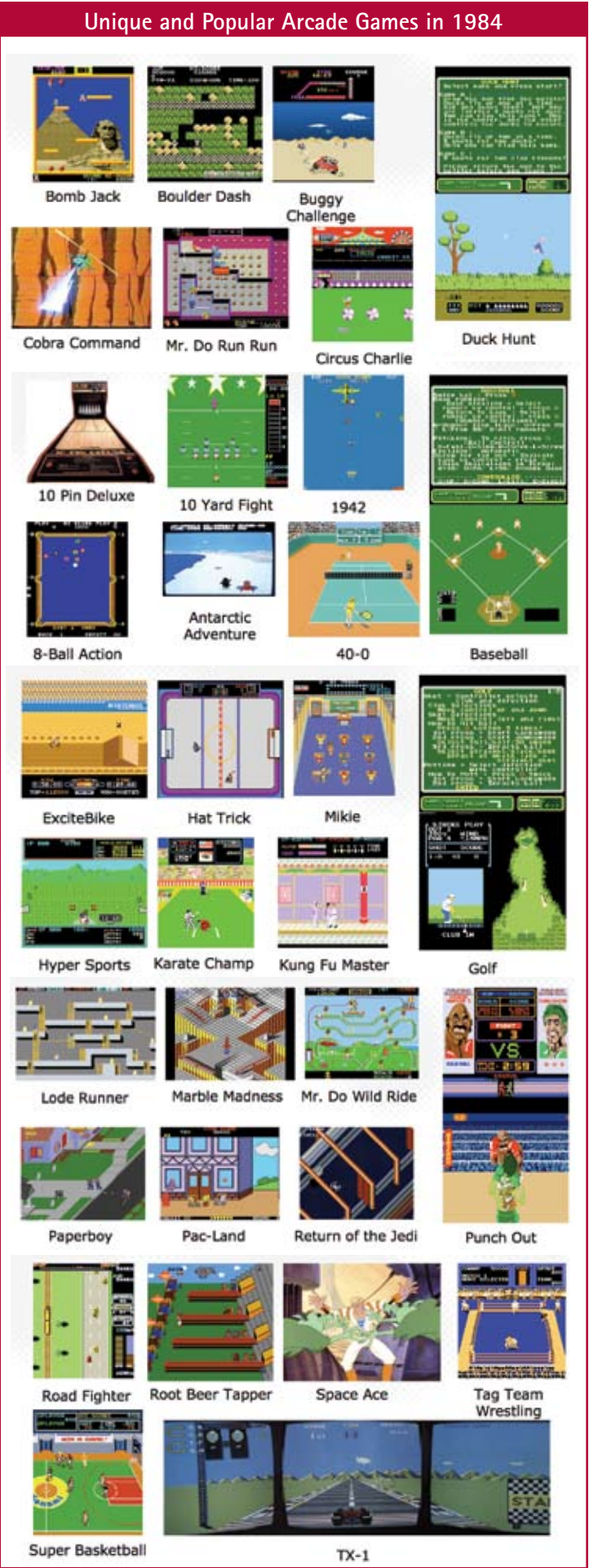
Of the 34 games that made our list (see chart, left), 13 of them represented incremental innovations over existing game mechanics while 21 of them offered new game mechanics—radical innovation for the market (*Antartic Adventure, Bomb Jack, Boulder Dash, Buggy Challenge, Cobra Command, Mr. Do Run Run, Circus Charlie, Duck Hunt, ExciteBike, Hat Trick, Mikie, Hyper Sports, Kung Fu Master, Lode Runner, Marble Madness, Mr. Do Wild Ride, Paperboy, Pac-Land, Punch Out, Road Fighter, and Root Beer Tapper*).

Casual Games List, 2006

I used RealArcade’s Top Ten for January and February, and Logler’s Top Ten from March through December. To qualify for this list, a game had to meet several requirements:

- The game had to remain in the Top Ten for four weeks or more.
- No games with same game mechanic were allowed, irrespective of theme.
- Themes could be duplicated as long as the game mechanics were different.

Of the 16 games that made our list (see chart, pg 27), 11 of them represented incremental innovations over existing game mechanics while only five introduced new game mechanics, providing radical innovation to the casual market (*Magic Match, Fish Tycoon, Family Feud, Virtual Villagers* and *Westward*).



Conclusion

Let's be clear: Incremental innovation is a good thing—a great thing. After all, it's what most players feel comfortable with. Still, it seems that there was a lot more radical innovation 20 years ago than there is today, and that's a little worrisome. I believe that radical innovation is what attracts new players and renews the interest of existing ones who may have grown bored with their favorite genre.

In order to keep a healthy industry we need both kinds of innovation. And the more the better.

Juan Gril heads the production at Joju Games. Joju produces Casual Games for web, PC downloads, consoles and mobile platforms, and for clients such as RealArcade, MTV Networks, Comedy Central, and Nick-elodeon. Previously, as one of the first members of the Yahoo! Games team, Juan was the lead producer for the downloadable games area and community manager of multi-player games. In the last year of his tenure at Yahoo!, Juan was the head of Yahoo! Games Studios. Juan is one of the editors of the IGDA Casual Games White Paper, and is a frequent speaker at industry events. Juan holds a BFA in Electronic Media from the University of Illinois. He can be reached at juangril@jojugames.com.





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Game Schedules on Project or Excel? How about BOTH!?

Combining the Power of Two Programs into One Powerful Solution

Mike McShaffry

Most game studios are stuck with a nasty choice when creating schedules for their next great game:

- (Bad) Option One: Struggle with MS-Project and attempt to create a schedule that accounts for dependencies, varying weeks during different months, holidays, and vacation time.
- (Bad) Option Two: Rely on the convenience and accessibility of MS-Excel to create a high level schedule that ignores all these (and a few other) important scheduling issues.

Most producers usually start with Project because they know that if they ignore vacations, dependencies, and the rest, the dev team will end up hating them and the commitments they made on the team's behalf. But, after hours of wrestling with Project and trying to “debug” its problems, they'll realize that an inaccurate schedule is better than no schedule at all—so they'll revert back to Excel and within a couple of days knock out the schedule for a AAA game with 80 developers.

The truth is that both Project and Excel are woefully inadequate tools to schedule today's AAA game development. That is to say, they are inadequate *by themselves*. Get these two pieces of software to work together, however, and you can create a very effective project management tool:

- (Good) Option Three: Use MS-Project and MS-Excel together to manage your project schedules.

Struggling with MS-Project

I've been scheduling game projects, big and small, for about 15 years. The first scheduling I ever did was for *Ultima 8*, a fantasy role-playing game created by Richard Garriott, one of the founders of Origin Systems and a pioneer of the games industry. For *Ultima 8*, we used Project to schedule a 24-month project with 50 developers. This was in 1992, when most game projects were much, much smaller. *Ultima 8* was a great testbed for using Project on a large game development project.

Of course the schedule was a complete disaster—probably mostly due to my lack of experience. Back then, I would typically ask my team to list out as many tasks as they could think of, estimate durations for these tasks, and tell me if they thought one task should come before another. I would basically type this information into Project, panic a bit when I saw my project needed eight years and 200 developers. Then I would print a task list out and hand it back to them.

The trouble was that I had no real way to determine if the schedule was accurate. I couldn't tell which tasks were way over- or under-estimated—or which ones had been forgotten altogether. I also found it difficult to use the schedule to estimate costs—especially if I wanted to tweak the scope of the project during publisher negotiations.

How MS-Excel Can Help

After more than a decade of working with Project, I finally stumbled on two things that helped me solve these problems. The first thing I found was a macro that made it easy to export tasks to Excel. The second thing I found was how to create and use an Excel PivotTable.

A macro is a little program that you run to perform repetitive, time-consuming, or mundane tasks. You can record the task and play it back later, or if you know Visual Basic you can write the macro yourself. You can also search the web for macros written by others and adapt them for your own use. One such macro—written by Jack Dahlgren in 2002 (*figure 1*)—was used to export tasks from Project to Excel so that team members could look at their schedules whether or not they owned their own copy of Project.

Initially, I adapted this macro to export tasks into a straight data table of tasks—which at first was ugly to look at. Subsequently, however, that task list has become one of the core tools of my schedule-building process with the help of a PivotTable.

Using a PivotTable, I can quickly rearrange data by dragging and dropping columns to different row, column or summary positions. When combined with my export macro, the PivotTable enables me to do the following things:

- Find out how much time is allocated to each resource group on my project (art, animation, audio, design, programming, production, testing, etc.). (*Figure 2*)
- Find out how much time is allocated to each major feature of my project (core technology, player character animation, physics, world editor, etc.). (*Figure 3*)
- Find out how each resource group contributes to each of these features. (*Figure 4*)



Figure 1

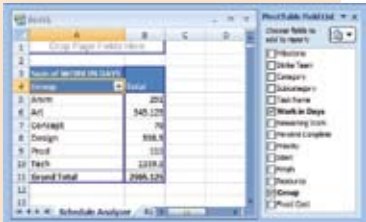


Figure 2



Figure 3

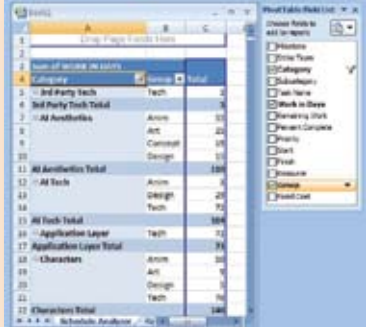


Figure 4

Game Schedules on Project or Excel? How about BOTH!?

Combining the Power of Two Programs into One Powerful Solution

“The truth is that both Project and Excel are woefully inadequate tools to schedule today's AAA game development. Get these two pieces of software to work together, however, and you can create a very effective project management tool.”

Think about those three things carefully for a moment. An experienced game producer has an intuitive feel for how much effort certain things will take, but buried under 5,000 individual tasks in a Project file this person might not be able to “step back” and look at the big picture. However, exporting those tasks to Excel—and manipulating them with a PivotTable—gives you that big picture.

Adapting These Tools to Any Project

These simple tools can be adapted to any project in just a few hours. To make that possible, there are three things you need to do:

- 1. Add additional data to your tasks and resources to help the macro create categories for your tasks.
- 2. Grab and install the ExportToXLS macro from my web site.
- 3. Run the macro and play with your new PivotTable.

Categorizing Your Tasks and Resources

To make this approach to project management work, you must first add some additional data to your tasks and resources in Project. Project has numerous customizable columns you can use for this purpose, and the ExportToXLS macro makes some assumptions about some of these new columns. Here's exactly what you need to do:

- 1. Open your project file.
- 2. Select the Gantt Chart by going to View->Gantt Chart.
- 3. Right click on one of the column headers, and select “Insert Column.”
- 4. Select Text1 in the Field Name text box.
- 5. Change the title to “Category.”
- 6. Repeat those steps to add the Text2 column, and change the title to “Subcategory.”
- 7. Assign each task in your project a meaningful category and subcategory.
- 8. Set the Priority field for each task based on what milestone you want it to appear in: 900's for M1, 800's for M2, 700's for M3, etc. **Note:** You must set your leveling style to “Priority, Standard” for this to work properly, which you do in the dialog box you see when you select “Tools->Level Resources..”

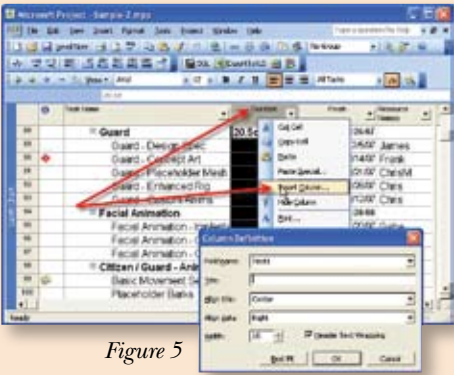


Figure 5

Tip

Category and subcategory names should be descriptive and useful. Keep them oriented to features or sub-parts of those features that

could change in scope as you spend more or less time on them. In addition, they should be independent of the type of work being done (such as art, code, or audio) because resource groups will take care of that.

- 9. Go to the resource sheet by selecting View->Resource Sheet.
- 10. If you haven't already done so, give each resource a resource group. I use: Art, Anim (for animators), Tech (for programmers), Prod (for producers or management), Audio, Design, Level Building, Concept, and Test. Use whatever resource groups make the most sense to you.
- 11. Level your project (Tools->Level Resources, then click the “Level Now” button).
- 12. Save your project file!

Installing the ExportToXLS Macro

You've completed the first part—your project file now has the data you need to do some serious work with a pivot table. Now you need to get the macro. Here's how:

- 1. Go to my site: <http://www.mcshaffry.com/mrmike>. Click on Resources and download Microsoft Project 2003 Macros (they will work with 2007 too!)
- 2. Follow the installation instructions in the readme.pdf.

Note that you'll get some other useful stuff in the ZIP file—feel free to experiment with them—but don't forget to work with copies of your actual project files until you get the hang of these macros!

Exporting Your Data

Now, the last step: Running the ExportToXLS macro.

- 1. If Excel is running, close any open files and shut down the program.
- 2. Open your project file.
- 3. Select Tools->Macro->Macros (or hit Alt-F8).
- 4. Select the ExportToXLS macro, and click Run.
- 5. Enter “1” in the dialog box (assuming that your schedule starts with Milestone 1 or M1).
- 6. Don't panic. When you run the macro for the first time you'll get an error. The Visual Basic editor will be up, with some code that looks like the picture to the right
- 7. Click Tools->References and check the Microsoft Excel 11.0 Object Library (or 12.0 if you have Office 2007). Close Visual Basic and re-run the macro.

If the macro is running, you should see it launch Excel automatically and add tons of stuff to the worksheets. Excel can't tell you aren't typing all of this stuff straight from the keyboard—so don't touch anything until the macro finishes its work. When it is finished, you should have something that looks like this:

Note: If you don't see the PivotTable Field List (the box on the right), click the Milestone field in the Excel sheet and it will pop up!

To get a feel for what the PivotTable will do, check and

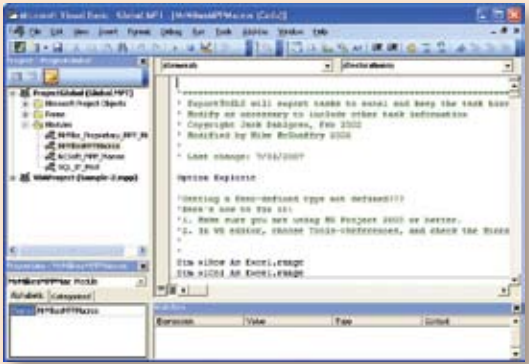


Figure 6

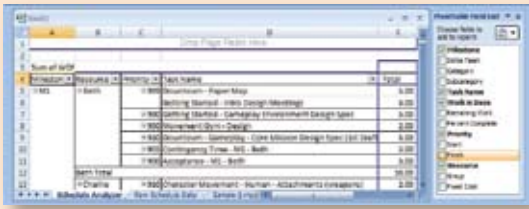


Figure 7

Conclusion

It as been said that neither Project nor Excel is well suited for effective project management. However, using the two in tandem will enable you to effectively and (somewhat) painlessly schedule game projects.

Mike McShaffry (mrmike@mcshaffry.com) has worked in the games industry since 1990. He has worked as a programmer or producer on the *Ultima* series including *Ultima Online* at Origin Systems and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* at Ion Storm. Mike built two studios in Austin—Compulsive Development and BreakAway Austin—and worked on projects as varied as a kid's title for Mattel Media and a simulation of the deck of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier for the US Navy. Mike is now a freelance consultant working to help his clients with business development, production workflow, and technology strategy. Mike is the author of *Game Coding Complete* (now in its 2nd edition), originally published by Paraglyph Press in the spring of 2003. Mike holds a B.S. of Computer Science from the University of Houston.

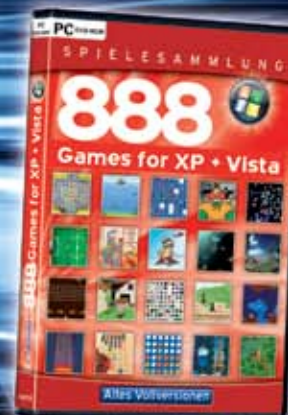
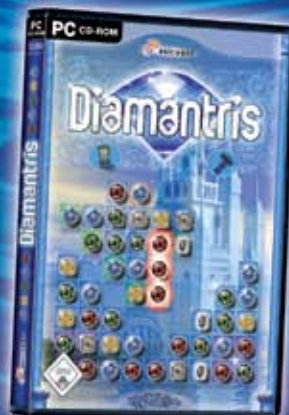
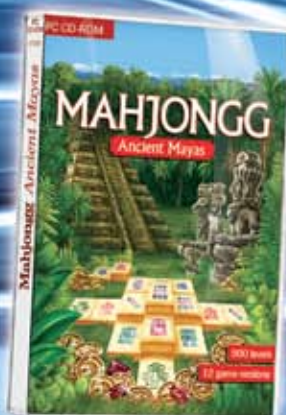
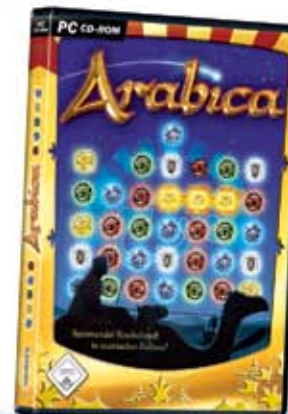
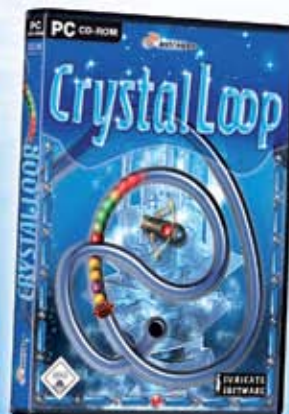
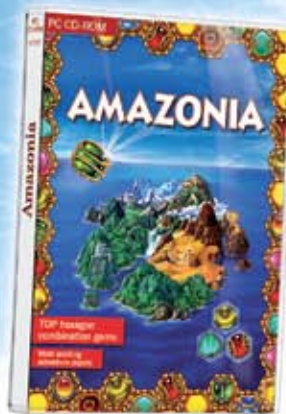
uncheck some of the fields in the PivotTable Field List. As they appear and disappear, the pivot table will reorganize itself. For example:

- Uncheck everything but Resource and Work in Days and you will see a report of how many days each resource is working on your project.
- Clear Resource and check Group, and you will see how many days each resource group is working on your project.
- Clear the check on the group field, and check Category and Subcategory. You will then see a report of how many days are devoted to each major feature of your project.
- Check the box with the resource group again, and you will be able to analyze how the different resource groups contribute to each feature.

This is one of the best ways I know of to analyze a schedule. If, for example, you have an animated character with no scheduled animation tasks, you won't see any contribution from the animation group. This tells you that you need to go back into the schedule and add some animation tasks for this feature.

A PivotTable can do much more than what I have described here, of course, but even the little bit I have described here provides a powerful means of analyzing the amount of resources assigned to each feature in your game so that you can quickly see where too much or too little time has been allocated.

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